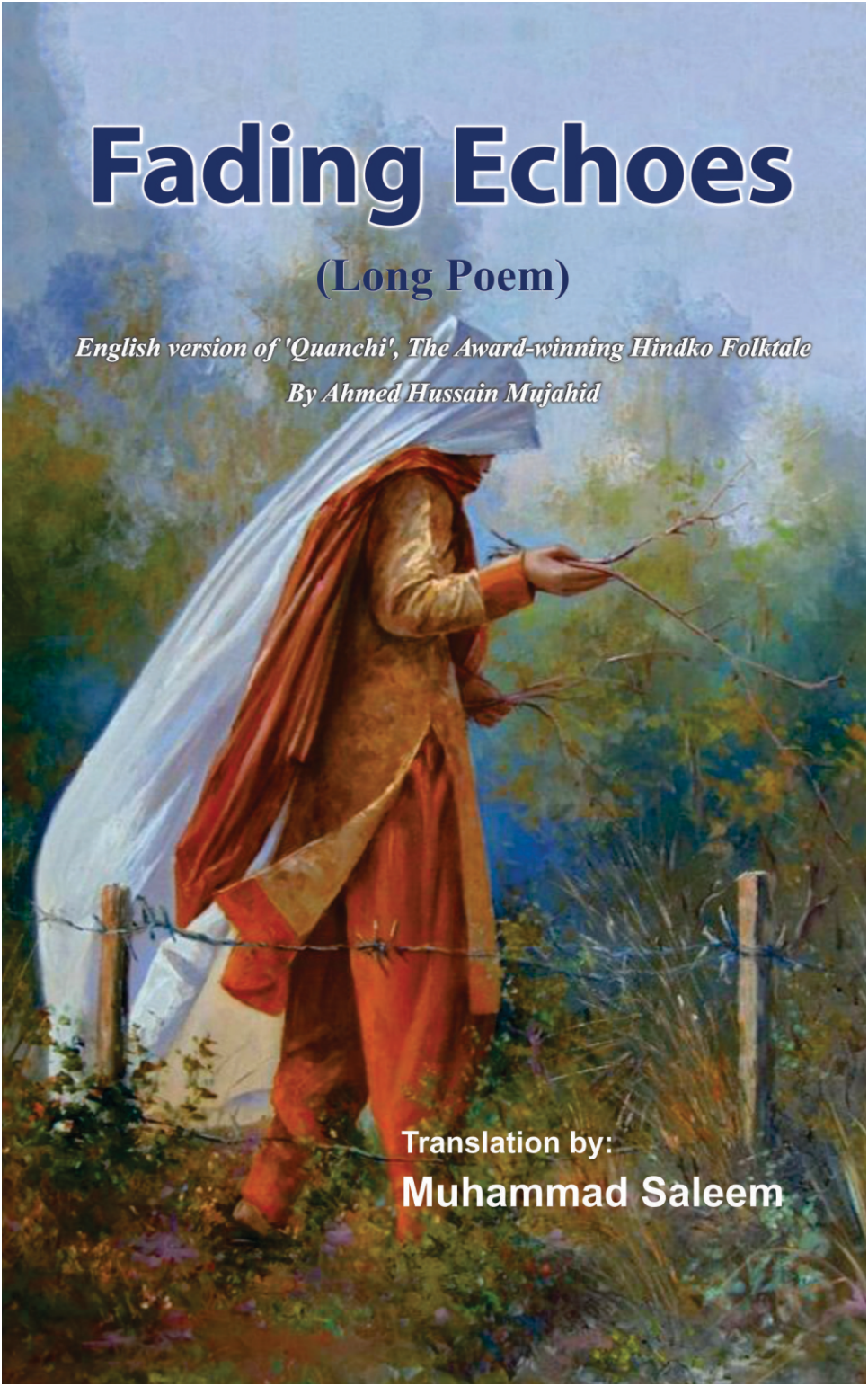
Fading Echoes

(Long Poem)

English version of 'Quanchi', The Award-winning Hindko Folktale

By Ahmed Hussain Mujahid



Translation by:

Muhammad Saleem

Mr. Ahmad Hussain Mujahid is a multitalented intellectual. In addition to being a renowned and widely acclaimed poet of Urdu and Hindko languages , his contributions in other forms of literature are also meritorious. He is an expert in prosody that lays down the foundation of poetry. In recognition of his services to literature, the government of Pakistan conferred the most prestigious Presidential Award on him , called the Pride of Performance.

Fading Echoes is a versified translation of a love story written in Hindko by Mr. Mujahid in a poetic narrative. " Can poetry be translated?" , has always been a big question. In his widely diffused aphorism, Rober Frost , the American poet, says that poetry is what gets lost in translation. The reason is that poetry is a nuanced , special kind of language that operates on multiple levels of meanings. Translating poetry brings triple whammy of challenges: linguistic, aesthetic and cultural; elements all difficult to adapt. Of these challenges, the cultural element is the most crucial one. The translator has to translate the ethos and spirit of the locale from where the poetry emerged. It was a pleasant surprise for me to see that the translation was a mirror image of the original text. In this case the advantage to the translator was a blessing that he also hails from the area the poet belongs. The translation is very captivating and worth reading. I congratulate Mr. Ahmad Hussain Mujahid for writing a marvelous love story and Mr. Muhammad Saleem for introducing this piece of literature to the world.

Dr. Waheed Ahmad
Islamabad
28th September, 2024

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To

Raffay

Faateh

Arfa

Romaisa

Fading Echoes

Foreword

Pilu, the composer of the popular Punjabi tale Mirza Sahiban reflects on the fleeting nature of time, stating, “How does the world run on? /Councils and assemblies pass away." William Shakespeare echoes this sentiment in The Tempest: "The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces/The solemn temples, the great globe itself/ Yea, all which it inherit shall dissolve." Yet, amidst this decay, literature stands as an unshakable island, defying the ferocious waves of time. Stories, unlike physical structures, transcend the limitations of the physical world. They remain ever fresh, a source of joy and understanding for each generation.

Every era has its own distinct literary voice, a reflection of the prevailing cultural currents. Literature fuels societal progress by fostering empathy and understanding. Folklore, rooted in truth, often employs poetic embellishments to enhance its emotional impact. It serves a vital purpose, prompting us to ponder the significance of literature in society.

The word Quanchi, derived from the Hindko dialect, translates to "a pair of scissors." However, within the narrative of this story, it transcends its literal meaning. It becomes a metaphorical instrument, capable of severing the very core of one's being when unrequited love descends into a torrent of sighs, tears, and yearning. The intensity of these emotions can be overwhelming, a burden one carries close to their heart. This raw vulnerability is precisely why I chose to translate Quanchi as Fading Echoes.

Quanchi, a captivating poetic narrative woven from the love story of Munshi and Halima, has been meticulously retrieved and assembled by Ahmad Hussain Mujahid, the famous poet and writer. The story unfolds in a village where Munshi arrives to oversee a commercial logging project. Halima in Fading Echoes (Quanchi) , young and defiant , represents the advent of a modern woman torn between her aristocratic traditional world and her world of dreams . She must negotiate a grey area displaying the contradictory complexity of an emerging modern world . Munshi voluntarily and peacefully rejects the institutions based on property due to his consciousness born of artistic vision of life. He is a metaphor of non-chauvinistic loving male.

The narrative is steeped in the local history and cultural tapestry. Literacy was uncommon during

this era, and knowledge was primarily transmitted through oral storytelling. Storytelling served as the bedrock of society, with people considering themselves well-educated if they had absorbed a vast repertoire of tales. Minstrels and singers served as custodians of these stories, passing them down through generations. However, this reliance on oral tradition resulted in a significant cultural and literary loss.

As a resident of Balakot, the gateway to the Kaghan Valley, I possess a deep connection to the environment that birthed this chronicle. The snow-capped peak of Musallah, the dense Darshi Forest, and the winding paths traversing the ridges and rocks of Sharhan and Shogran – these elements have remained largely unchanged for centuries. Just a few decades ago the recitation of Quanchi in a well-modulated and expressive voice held immense power over its listeners. The performer, possessing a profound understanding of the characters, embodied them with perfect pitch and accent, captivating the audience completely. However, due to the absence of a documented version, much like most of the audience, I was left uncertain about the narrative's beginning, end, and the identities of the supporting characters. Despite this, Quanchi possessed the same potency and emotional depth that have universalized the appeal

of epics like Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal, Mirza-Sahiban, Sassi- Pannu , or Laila-Majnun.

Fueled by a deep commitment to preserving this timeless love story, Ahmad Hussain Mujahid, a fellow resident of Balakot, embarked on the daunting task of rescuing it from the clutches of time. This undertaking was far from effortless. Mujahid embarked on extensive journeys, traversing the entirety of Hazara, the northernmost division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and numerous towns and villages scattered across the sprawling hills of Azad Kashmir. His relentless pursuit to piece together a coherent shape of the tale spanned a decade, a testament to Mujahid's unwavering literary dedication.

I must admit that Quanchi has raised the stature of Hindko to soaring heights, a mother tongue capable of expressing the subtlety of feelings as well as the splendor of emotions, second none to any contemporary language. The narrative deserves widespread recognition and appreciation. In this context , English, being the lingua franca, could be the most suitable medium to disseminate this message to a global audience.

To illuminate the path for our readers, let us consider the works of two towering figures from Persian literature: the poet, astronomer, and mathematician Hakim Omar Khayyam of

Nishapur, and Hafiz Shirazi. Their verses, translated into English by Edward Fitzgerald and Richard Le Gallienne respectively, gained widespread popularity in Victorian England and the West as a whole.

Fading Echoes follows the pattern of *masnavi* which begins with praising Allah, eulogising Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and paying tributes to the four caliphs and companions of the Prophet. The poet then usually versifies a few thoughts on poetry and eloquence. In *masnavi* the poet is free to use different rhyming words in every new couplet. Unlike *ghazzals* there is no restriction on the number of couplets. This makes *masnavi* a suitable mode of expression for themes that require describing events at length or that need some kind of detailed narrative, such as, epics, romantic tales or philosophic notions. *Masnavi* Sehr-ul-Bayan, (1803) by Mir Hassan Dhelvi and Gulzar-i-Naseem, (1844) by Pundit Daya Shankar Naseem are cases in point.

While converting Quanchi into English, I have tried to remain faithful, as far as possible, to the original poetic flow of the lore. Names of certain indigenous drugs like *'Mamekh'*, and *'Ratan jog'* have been left as such, whereas nearest alternatives to some expressions have been contrived; like *'Hazrat'* almost equivalent to 'reverent" , *'Lala'* a word of respect and love for an elder , *'Muezzin'* a

caller for prayer, *'Imam'* a prayer leader, *'Masi'* maternal aunt, *'Munshi'* assistant, *'Kala'* dark , or *'Sava'* green.

MUHAMMAD SALEEM

Rawalpindi,

August 28, 2024

Hymn to God

With words or none, God claims our praise,
The King of Kings, through endless days.

Night turns to day, a silent rhyme,
His mighty hand, through all of time.

He showed us words, in stories spun,
Love's ember lit, in every one.

From water's kiss, clouds take their form,
Unveiling gems, safe from the storm.

He guides the ships on skies so vast,
No act of His is done in haste.

When troubles rise, where shall I roam?
His sovereign hand will lead me home.

In honor of the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him)

The world unfolds, for Muhammad's grace,
His name a light, in every land its place.

Arab caravans, lost in desert's sand,
He guides them to God's most holy hand.

Yathrib, a town where shadows used to creep,
By his arrival, bathed in light so deep.

Even Nanak, with wisdom's gentle hum,
Declared all things chant Muhammad's name.

Kabir Das, with numbers as his guide,
Knew salvation's path, by him would confide.

Remembering Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddique

The First Righteous Caliph

Abu Bakr, companion, his loyalty so strong,
To the Prophet's teachings, his faith did belong.

The world in amazement, at his unwavering trust,
In Muhammad's pronouncements, forever he'd adjust.

Migration's call echoed, with none to share the way,
But Abu Bakr stood firm, a beacon to display.

Comfort cast aside, a burden he embraced,
For the cause of his faith, a sacrifice embraced.

Open-handed and generous, the word "no" unknown,
His wealth freely offered; a seed generously sown.

At the Prophet's command, possessions all arose,
Never a thought of reclaiming, wherever the path goes.

Love for the Prophet fueled his every deed,
Following his lead, a path where hearts are freed.

Leading prayers of believers, a duty he did hold,
By the Prophet's side forever, a story to be told.

Remembering Hazrat Omar bin Khattab

The Second Righteous Caliph

Enraged, he left his house with anger's sting,
His sister, brother-in-law felt his rage take wing.

Towards the Prophet's chamber, his steps did race,
But found his fury replaced by Allah's grace.

The messenger's prayer, a shield so strong,
Erased the darkness, righted every wrong.

By Allah's will, to Muhammad's door he came,
His enemies defeated, whispers of his fame.

Umar, the soldier, by the Prophet's side,
Loyal and fierce, in righteousness he confide.

The Prophet's words, a testament so grand,
"Wherever Umar treads, the devil flees the land."

Remembering Hazrat Usman bin Affan

The Third Righteous Caliph

This personage, munificence in every guise,

His chastity and purity a beacon in all eyes.

Whether kin or stranger, all were treated fair,

Usman, a giver, with burdens none to bear.

Folks loved to call him "generous" and true,

His heart with kindness, ever shining through.

He wished to walk near the Prophet's blessed side,

His love for Islam, a boundless, surging tide.

I yearn to mirror Usman's noble deed,

Martyred, with Quran his final peaceful seed.

Remembering Hazrat Ali

The Fourth Righteous Caliph

When Muhammad's truth began to brightly shine,
Pagans sowed discord, a darkness to entwine.

Family, friends, even strangers turned their face,
Abu Jahl fueled the flames, a venomous embrace.

Defeated at each turn, their malice would not cease,
A plot they hatched; their minds consumed by greed's disease.

To kill the Prophet, under cover of the night,
And crush the faith, extinguish its guiding light.

But whispers soft , from Allah’s hand conveyed,
The Prophet knew ,’twas time for Hijra made.

As darkness fell, with purpose swift and bold,
Ali took Muhammad's place, a story yet untold.

No one could match the courage Ali displayed,
He faced the night , in the Prophet’s cloak arrayed.

Fading Echoes

“Let me try to fasten the rings of words in rhyme,

A journey down memory lane, a tale of bygone time.”

"Fading Echoes, a story from my elders wise,

Of Halima and Munshi, love that brightly lies.

This truth, not woven from a writer's fertile mind,

Not found in pages, nor a dream you'll leave behind.”

“No shop holds this treasure, no fakir's toil can claim,

No spinning wheel has spun this narrative's flame.

No Mullah's voice has ever sung this song,

This story lives in hearts, on tongues it lingers long.

I smolder like the kiln of the potter, intense,

Open your heart, for my tale needs a witness.

This story sings of Kaghan, a valley so grand,

Where fate unfolds as written by God's own hand.

Once ruled by Sikhs, this land held vast domain,
Hazara then, a part of Kashmir's domain.
Beyond Kiwai, a village, Sharan takes its rest,
Darshi Forest sprawls, a haven truly blessed.
Bagir's woods and Musa's sacred Musallah stand,
Where courage falters in this untamed land.
Musallah's peak pierces the heavens so high,
No plant, no grass, no water dares to lie.
This mountain, named oddly, boasts a storied past,
Snow falls in abundance, a treasure that will last.
Among its peers, Musallah stands the tallest peak,
Its lofty crown, a place the lonely seek.
Darshi Forest, with cedars, a verdant sight,
Dotted with houses, bathed in morning's light.
Some perched near ponds on ridges, reaching high,
While others nestled by the village, nestled nigh.
The village hall stood close beside the mosque,
Imdad Khan's dwelling, a familiar host.

The old country house, a memory of Sikandar,
While Qalandar owned the field that stretched yonder.

These brothers, though kin, held discord in their hearts,

A rift unseen that tore their lives apart.

Apart from this, Baba Faqira's mill did stand,
Across the way, Kala's shop, a landmark in the land.

A patch of ruins, near where Khana made his home,

And Sawa the potter, his oven built of loam.

An elderly lady, a neighbor kind and true,

Big Aunt they called her, with affection ever new.

The saint's revered tomb, a distance from the crowd,

A freshwater spring nearby, whispering soft and loud.

Moulvi Sakhawat, the prayer leader, resided there,
Close to the tomb, where peace filled the air.

The villagers, a band content and strong,

Stood side by side where life meandered long.

Rich or poor, their hearts held no disdain,

No envy whispered, sowing bitter strain.

No faultfinding, no gossip filled the air,

Helping hands were always waiting there.

The weak found solace, free from cruel abuse,

No prying ears on secrets they must use.

Though quarrels flared, they'd quickly fade away,
Forgiveness bloomed with each dawning day.

No paradise, this village held its flaws,

But love and respect graced their simple laws.

Sikandar, a landowner, oft felt unwell,

A gentle soul, yet burdened by a spell.

His wife, alas, a woman quick to fret,

A constant storm, her temper hard to forget.

Halima, firstborn, a beauty to behold,

A radiant spirit, worth more than purest gold.
Zulaikhan, younger, with a restless heart,

Her fickle ways would soon tear lives apart.

Their life had comfort, yet a yearning grew,

A son they wished for, blessings ever new.

A child not bought, but heaven's precious gift,

A dream beyond the reach of mortal thrift.

Sikandar, kind, endured a troubled fate,

His wife's sharp tongue, a constant, heavy weight.
Darshi Forest, a haven calm and bright,

Where peace and concord bathed them all in light.

But then Bashira, shattering the peace,

Whispered a secret, bringing hearts to cease.

To Moulvi Sahib, the news he did impart,
Spreading like wildfire, tearing love apart.

The village stirred, their daily tasks on hold,
Gathered in the hall, a tale yet untold.

Debates grew heated, long into the night,

No answer found, no path to set things right.

With morning prayers, the whispers rose anew,
Back to the hall, before the morning dew.

News reached Big Aunt, who rushed with sudden haste,

From her home she stormed, a tempest to be faced.
A fiery scene before the hall she made,

Her fierce pronouncements left them all dismayed."

(Big Aunt's Fury:)

"Baramula's men will trample our domain,"

Big Aunt roared, her voice a storm of rain.

"Your council sleeps, oblivious to the threat,

When contractors come, with greed as their amulet!

The forest weeps, its cedars, soon to fall,

Our cooling shade, a memory we'll recall.

The brimming pond, a desolate, cracked land,

No sacred trees, no blessings at hand!

When forest's cloak is torn from mountain's side,

Only then will reason your slumber deride.

Sweet breezes gone, fair weather lost in time,

Darshi a tale, a village turned to grime!

Our youth will flee, seek pastures far and wide,

Sisters left waiting, yearning deep inside.

Go fetch your pipes, your hemp, and smoke your fears,

Like lost transvestites, shedding idle tears!

I stand, a tree on crumbling cliff's embrace,

A setting sun, frail yet etched with grace.

My lion's roar will pierce your hollow pride,

Empty boasts echo, nowhere left to hide!"

(Moulvi Sakhawat , calming the situation:)

"Peace, Big Aunt, let your anger simmer down,

Escort her home and ease her troubled frown."

He turned and spoke, with wisdom in his eye,

"What troubles Imdad? Can anyone reply?"

(Imdad Khan , agreeing:)

"Big Aunt speaks truth, her words a sharp alarm,

While we slept soundly, danger caused us harm."

(Kala; the Shopkeeper, interrupting impatiently:)

"Nazira! Water from the spring, quick I say!

This endless talk just muddles things today.

Since sunrise, not a morsel touched my lips,

No tea, no bread, not even water sips!"

(Sikandar, observing thoughtfully:)

"I've pondered this, delved deep to understand,

But haste is unwise, let's wait for all at hand."

(Moulvi Sakhawat, agreeing with Sikandar:)

"This is no jest, let's speak with seriousness,

Sikandar weighs his words with utmost seriousness.

Why fret on futures yet to take their form?

Rise up, good people, and weather this coming storm."

(Exactly after a week of the meeting, two individuals representing Ganda Singh Firm arrive at Darshi Forst to start working on the logging project. The villagers reassemble in the hall. Both

men reach the hall. They greet the assembly, as one of them opens his mouth:)

"Permission sought, to enter and attend,

Your voice we wish to hear, a conversation to mend."

(The crowd warmly return the greeting. Moulvi Sakhawat; a calming voice:)

"Welcome, good sirs," he spoke with gentle grace,

"Find seats and speak, with thoughts you wish to embrace."

(They find a simple seat upon a cot. The man resumes:)

"Respect you've shown, a kindness undeserved,

For this we offer thanks, sincerely served."

"Hamid," he said, with hand upon his chest,

"A humble worker, putting skills to test.

My services, like brothers, stand for you,

At your command, whatever task is due.

This, Munshi Zia, from Baramula's hold,

A kin by heart, a story to be told.

The ruler's hand, though Sikh, may hold the sway,

The heavens heed a different, holier say.

Muslims by creed, we show a brother's grace,

For faith transcends the boundaries of race.

A weary soul, adrift in foreign lands,

Finds Muslim hands to offer helping hands.

Like those who aid the lost, we kindly plead,

Hear our proposal, with hearts that give good heed.

May your wise judgment not be led astray,

And trust remain, though hopes may hang in play."

(Qalandar mutters :)

"Though flowery speeches are not my way ,

Your words hold truth, there’s no need to say.

Sikhs hold the reins , that much is plain,

But heed the warning etched in the pan.

You’ll fell the cedars a mighty stand,

Leaving us bare , stripped of our land.

Our days will dwindle, lazy and slow,

Empty and hungry, where will we go?”

(Hamid :)

"Brother," Hamid spoke, his voice sincere,

"Cast out such doubts, let reason conquer fear.

Duplicity's a stain, a path untrue,

Honest toil builds a life both strong and new.

We share this land, Kashmir's heart we hold,

Hazara's beauty, a story to be told.

Let trust, not doubt, within your spirit bloom,

See through our hearts, dispel the gathering gloom.

We strive to meet your needs, and find our share,

A fair exchange, a burden all can bear."

(Imdad Khan responds:)

"Our plea is simple, brother, clear and plain,

Speak truth, be honest, let good faith remain.

This land, a gift from God, we hold in trust,

As stewards, guarding what we know as just.

The trees, the hills, all bathed in His embrace,

His watchful gaze on every sacred space.

Greed's tempting call, a path we must renounce,

For arrogance brings only sorrow's ounce.

We seek no burden on your shoulders placed,

Nor favors asked, a simple life embraced.

But life demands its daily, urgent fare,

Each breath a struggle, a constant, pressing snare.

With idle hands, how can our families thrive?

If trees fall silent, how can we survive?”

(Hamid assures:)

"Fear of God guides me, brothers, hear my plea,

With open hearts, the truth you all shall see.

The law is clear, a rule for all to know,

A fallen tree, a sapling then must grow.

First comes the nursery, a verdant life to start,

Then roads to Darshi, easing every heart.

Mansehara's dawn, Peshawar's twilight glow,

Trade's open door, where fortunes rise and flow.

Let not the trees your troubled thoughts ignite,

Each planted seed, a promise held so tight.

Should I transgress, God's wrath I'll surely face,

Munshi at your door, with honest, timely grace.

All questions answered, doubts shall find release,

A watchful eye, to bring about sweet peace.

The price of trees, a committee's hand to hold,

Daily wages paid, for Darshi's young and bold."

(Moulvi Sakhawat agrees:)

"Plausible at last," the elder did declare,

"Committee's watchful eye, a burden we can bear.

The work they track, with fairness as their guide,

But brothers speak, this path, where does it reside?"

(Sikandar:)

Sikandar declares, voice booming with command,

“Speak freely , brothers, let your thoughts expand.

Moulvi Sahib’s words , a path we can explore,

But all must speak , before we close the door.”

(Fakira, the miller, a tremor in his voice:)

"Build the road , but with care where my drainpipe’s wide,

Leave Sava’s furnace untouched , this I confide.

An old man’s words , with friends by whom I stand,

A simple wish , for their approval planned.”

(Hamid urges:)

“Let questions fly , all doubts be put to rest,

Disbandment’s call, let’s hold it in our breasts.

The project beckons , a future we ignite,

First road to carve , then cradle life in sight.”

(Hassan Gul speaks, eyes twinkling with respect for elders:)

“Regular prayers the elders hold so dear,

Why doubt their aim, their purpose crystal clear?

Grey-haired wisdom seals the rightful way,

Maulvi Sahib , bless us now, we humbly pray.”

(Moulvi Sahib's voice, a solemn call:)

"Time for action, brothers, cast aside delay,

Sing praises to our Prophet, light of day!

Oh Allah, grant Your guidance , ever near,

May Your messenger’s blessed face appear.

In visions bright , when earthly life is done,

Bless Darshi’s woods beneath the rising sun.

Grant life and strength to those who tend the land,

May this endeavor flourish in Your hand.

A happy ending, Lord, to all we seek,

Abundant blessings, on our homes to speak.

Though martyrs’ feats or valor may not shine,

Five times we kneel, our prayers forever Thine.

With sacred words , this journey we commence,

May Allah’s grace bring ease and recompence.”

(Hamid speaks with gratitude:)

"Munshi stays at Darshi, brothers dear,

A daily visit, your worries to quell , I swear.

His mind, a vault for every coin’s detail,

But keep your records , a safeguard that won’t fail.

Your kindness warms us , a treasure to hold,

Joining your ranks, a privilege to be told.”

(2)

(Gnada Singh Firm lays out the nursery , starts work on road construction and takes in hand the logging process . Munshi socializes with the villagers striking a chord with them. One day he passes by the water spring . Zulaikhan with some of her friends are pouring water in their pitchers. How could Zulaikhan remain a silent onlooker in such a situation? No sooner she sees Munshi than she exclaims:)

" Look at this Muslim, in service of Sikhs as a Munshi!

Note his strut and swagger , a sight that truly irks me.

It is all but to make inroads into Darshi Forest clearly!

He frequents the house of Hassan Gul daily , suspiciously."

(Girls burst into laughter, Munshi retorts:)

" Such sharp words sting, I cannot understand,

Why all the laughter rippling through this land?

A Muslim here , from Baramula I hail,

Hassan Gul's friend , a story that won't fail.

Does Darshi hide some treasure , some secret gleam?

A twisted reason for this Munshi's scheme?"

(Zulaikhan replies, eyes flashing with mischief:)

" Zulaikhan's my name, sixteen summers I have seen,

Tell me, Munshi, how do I appear, so keen?

Darshi's heart hold treasures , silver and gold,

But seek them not , for riches won't unfold.

Oh, come on , drink water from the pan,

This ain't a stage for fancy Englishman!

The jungle roars, a king's forbidden land,

Zulaikhan speaks, with a bold and steady hand."

(Munshi responds:)

“ Charm’s hold may tempt some , it’s readily confessed,

But yours, dear girl, leave this Munshi unstressed.

A stranger’s thirst , this cup I must decline,

Lest hidden venom taints the water fine.

Zulaikhan’s name, forever etched within,

Though fate’s cruel hand may lead me far from kin.”

(Munshi walks off as he finishes his speech. The girls chuckle, teasing Zulaikhan**.)**

Zulaikhan sighs, a yearning fills the air,

"Munshi, drawn to me, a wish beyond compare.

A touch, a sip, a stolen, sweet delight,

Why burns this fire within, so fierce and bright?"

“Hand in your gaze, a silent question dwells.”

Raishman inquires, "What fancy story compels?

Chatter surrounds you, yet you stand so mute,

Zulaikhan, pitcher waits, but laughter's the pursuit.”

(Zulaikhan fills her pitcher and joins the girls, each carrying their vessels as they head home. Back at home, her mother takes a jab at her:)

"Zam-Zam's holy water, did you bring it home?

Show me the pitcher, let this wonder roam!"

(Zulaikhan replies, a touch of defiance in her voice:)

"No Zam-Zam flows within this humble clay,

No stolen sip along the dusty way.

The spring, at dusk, with villagers it teems,

Each waits their turn, a rush of hopeful screams.

By twilight's hush, some pass and cleanse their face,

A shared resource, a wellspring of grace.

Would I deny them, for a selfish whim?

This, Mother dear, is Darshi, not Karbala's brim."

(Before mother could speak, Halima steps in. Her eyes narrowed at Zulaikhan:)

"A viper's tongue, unleashed with such a sting!

Perhaps a nail or two, to make your words take wing!"

(In another development, Munshi Zia Uddin confers with his friend Hassan Gul. He laments:)

"Fire in my throat, a thirst that burns so deep!

A sip from the spring, a solace I would reap.

But fear held me back, this village, oh my friend,

A place where customs know no seeming end!

Those girls, a flurry, I dared not ask for aid,

Especially that Zulaikhan, a fiery, sharp blade! "

(Hassan Gul chuckles, a warm smile on his face.)

"Zulaikhan, fiery, Sikandar's daughter true,

A gem she is, with a spirit shining through!

Don't judge by outward jabs, for hearts hold mysteries,

Her pranks may fly, yet kindness underlies."

(The same night, Halima and Zulaikhan retire to their room. Halima drifts off to sleep, but Zulaikhan remains wide awake, her thoughts consumed by Munshi.)

"Munshi's thoughts, a mystery in the night,

Did my harsh words ignite his inner plight?

This is my way, a childhood well-known guise,

But can he see the kindness in my eyes?

My taunts, a barb, a needless, cruel display,

A stranger here, in Darshi, far away.

Guests, God-sent, deserve a gentler hand,

Etiquette's rules, a truth I must withstand.

Who mocks a traveler, asks of age and name?

Yet why this ache? Why dwell upon his shame?

My gaze adrift, my heart a frantic drum,

The future veiled, the path yet to become. "

(Morning arrives, and Zulaikhan stirs awake with eyes puffy and hair a mess. Halima notices her sister's disheveled state. She inquires, concern etched on her face:)

"Zulaikhan, why the glumness at day's start?

Unscarfed, unshod, a sight that tears you apart.

What secret fire consumes you in the night?

Silent you were, a mystery taking flight."

(Zulaikhan replies:)

"A cankered heart? No need for such a fear,

No hidden woes to whisper in your ear.

Just maize bread's fault, a double helping's plight,

A grumbling tummy sets my morning right."

(Zulaikhan makes an excuse to satisfy Halima, but Munshi has caught hold of her without let up. Days are passing like this. One day when Halima was knitting a sweater for her father, her mother says to her:)

"Greens from the field, Halima, finish your knit,

A task awaits, before your needles can be quit.

Zulaikhan toys with fire, a childish game,

Her duties shunned, lost in a self-made frame.

Maize flour, my dear, from the hidden chest retrieve,

And ask your father for water, the household's thirst to relieve.

Tell Zulaikhan, the chutney needs a hand,

While bread I bake, a task I understand.

Curd waits to spin, a chore that can't be spurned,

Call her away from dreams, a lesson to be learned.

Fever's grip since yesterday, a thief of youthful glee,

Age's cruel hand, a burden on you and me.

Veins throb with tension, a battle I can't win,

Halima, dear, light the fire, let the warmth begin."

(Halima abandons her knitting , the sweater landing, forgotten on a nearby box. Logs gather in her arms as she approaches the fireplace. A sharp rap at the door pierces the quiet, sending a jolt of annoyance through the room. Halima's mother asks:)

"Who dares disrupt our peace with such a sound?

Halima, dear, greet whoever's to be found.

This constant banging wears upon my nerves,

See to the visitor, and bring them what observes."

(Halima rises. Reaching the door, she throws it open, revealing a young man holding a fiber bag. His face sparks a flicker of recognition in her eyes. Munshi Zia, she thinks with a start. Munshi extends a polite greeting:)

"Munshi Zia at your service, greetings I bring,

Sent by Lala Sikandar himself, on commissioned wing.

Here I stand, awaiting your esteemed reply,

To meet with your father, under a clear blue sky."

(Halima speaks :)

"No need to wait outdoors, the bag in hand,

Please, come inside, a guest in this fair land.

A long and dusty journey, down the hill you came,

Let me inform Lala Sikandar, of your esteemed name."

(Halima gestures towards the open doorway, inviting Munshi inside. He takes a moment to discreetly size her up before stepping into the house. Halima disappears to inform her mother. Munshi settles in, a dreamy look clouding his eyes:)

"Youth's bloom upon her face, a gift divine,

Nature's hand has shaped her, a beauty that will shine.

Like a gondola on Dal Lake's shimmering gleam,

Love's boundless tide, a captivating dream.

Halima, a jewel surpassing all compare,

A prayer answered, a treasure beyond compare.

Bagir's forest has never seen such grace,

A priceless gift, a wonder to embrace. "

(Munshi remains lost in a daydream, his thoughts swirling. Sikandar enters the house, a warm smile on his face, extends a welcoming greeting:)

"A stroke of fortune, your presence graces our door,

Munshi, speak freely, let your reasons soar.

My heart is open, a vessel to receive,

Speak your mind, and let our understanding weave."

(Munshi breaks free from his daydream, a touch of panic flashing in his eyes. Could Lala have discovered his encounter with Zulaikhan? He forces a smile and speaks:)

"Your gracious call, the fortune I embrace,

Here I stand, obedient, to take my rightful place.

Command me, Lala, as you see fit,

I stand at your disposal, with all my wit."

(Munshi converses with Sikandar, yet his gaze betrays him, lingering on the memory of Hilma. Sikandar speaks in a gentle, reassuring tone:)

"Fate's grand design, a tapestry divine,

We, mere creatures, woven in its line.

Illness may come, a burden I must bear,

But fret not, Munshi, you're a welcome guest, I swear.

Feel at ease, consider this your own abode,

Thankful for blessings, both milk and fertile road."

(Sikandar gets to his feet and calls Halima:)

"Halima, my dear, bring lassi to appease,

Quench our thirst, and set our minds at ease."

(Zulaikhan enters just as Halima prepares the drink. She, spotting the beverage, inquires in a curious tone:)

"Lassi, rich and creamy, crowned with golden gleam,

For whom this treat, Halima? Does a special guest dream?

Such care in its making, a secret you hold tight,

Share a sip, sister, let us both take flight!

Secrets you whisper, behind a closed door,

Relinquish the lassi, let me settle the score.

Serving the guest, a task I shall claim,

Let hospitality flow, in this household's name"

(Halima remains silent, offering no explanation. Zulaikhan takes the lassi and strides towards the inner house. Inside, Munshi awaits Halima's arrival with a longing gaze. His face falls when Zulaikhan enters instead. He sighs deeply and mutters to himself:)

"Halima absent, a cruel twist of fate,

Lassi replaced, a burning ball of hate.

Better to wander, a beggar's empty plea,

Than glimpse Zulaikhan, a sight I can't foresee.

Halima unseen, a torment I can't bear,

Suspended between life, a soul laid bare.

Darshi's vast forest, a canvas of despair,

I scream your name, Halima, lost in empty air."

(Zulaikhan sets the drink down with a pointed thud, a deliberate spill splashing onto the table. Her gaze locks Munshi's in a silent challenge . Munshi, lost in his thoughts of Halima, doesn't acknowledge her presence. Sikandar's voice echoes; gentle reprimand apparent:)

"Zulaikhan, a whirlwind disguised as a girl,

Where is the grace, the poise that used to unfurl?

Your entrance, a flurry, your exit, a breeze,

Such wildness, my dear, might bring you to your knees."

(Zulaikhan leaves the room after setting the lassi down. She mutters to herself:)

"Haste? No. Heedless? Never. Love unveils its might,

A fierce wind won't loosen a braid held tight.

A gentle hand holds the bowl, steady and sure,

But love’s bitter sting can make even the firmest endure.

Lala needs no explanations, love's a youthful game,

Zulaikhan's heart beats for Munshi, whispers his silent name."

(A few days later, Munshi finds himself at Hassan Gul's doorstep, his voice tinged with a sense of helplessness:)

"In this village, you're my only haven, my friend,

A refuge from loneliness, a bond that won't bend.

Your kindness, a mother's love, warm and true,

A comfort I've never sought, but now need from you.

Turmoil simmers within, a potter's fiery plight,

I beg your aid, a favor that set things right.

Ask me to chase the stars, I'll reach for the sky,

Grant this plea, a desperate friend's heartfelt cry."

(Hassan Gul listens patiently, his expression reflecting warm love but mingled with surprise, and amusement:)

"No envious glances cast on treasures I hold,

Your requests for service, a tale seldom told.

Perhaps a hidden gem catches your eye's keen gleam?

Speak plainly, dear brother, choose what you deem."

(Munshi, unable to hide his emotions , replies:)

"No yearning for possessions stirs my soul,

No idle pursuits leave their mark, take their toll.

Business and skill, these are my guiding lights,

Frugality's path, where integrity ignites.

Neither greed nor envy taints my heart's core,

May your memory remain sharp, forever more.

May blessings fill your home, your path be bright,

Never a hardship darken your day or night.

Today, a favor, a burden I confess,

Something beyond your grasp, I humbly request.

Look upon me, friend, with a steady gaze,

Grant me courage, a touch to light my maze."

(Munshi finishes his heartfelt confession. Hassan Gul stares back, a knowing glint in his eyes, yet remains silent. Munshi gathers his courage and speaks more openly:)

"Love's arrow has pierced, a flame unseen,

Though you pretend not to know, its potent keen.

By heavens above, never such a plight,

Tears flow freely, consumed by love's burning light.

Sleepless nights a torment, a burning brand,

A wick aflame, consumed by love's demand.

Offer guidance, friend, and blessings I'll bestow,

Else, love's yearning will consume me, bring me low."

(Munshi's passionate plea touches Hassan Gul's heart. His voice filled with concern:)

"Tell me, Zia, who has stolen your heart?

This love, so fierce, for whom are you prepared to depart?

Fear has no hold on me, my friend, that's true,

Speak freely, and all I can do, I'll do for you."

(Munshi hesitates, his voice barely a whisper:)

"Her name, a secret in the veiled dark,

My lips refuse to utter it, a painful spark.

My heart, a shattered vessel, my vision dimmed,

Love's path is tangled, by fate's decree hymned.

Grant me time, friend, to gather my strength,

Let my words find clarity, at last full length."

(Munshi casts a searching glance around, then speaks in a voice heavy with longing, placing a hand over his heart:)

"A vision from heaven, an angelic grace,

A pious beauty, with a celestial face.

Halima, my friend, Lala Sikandar's pride,

Zulaikhan's elder sister, in whom my heart confides.

A cool cedar's shade, a solace I crave,

But separation, a frozen sheet in a grave.

One fleeting glimpse, a memory I hold,

A love unspoken; a story untold."

(Munshi finishes . He closes his eyes, the weight of his unrequited love settling upon him. Hassan Gul remains silent for a long moment, then he rises and approaches Munshi, placing a comforting hand on his shoulder. Munshi opens his eyes, tears glistening in their depths. He stands speechless, the gesture offering a silent understanding.)

(3)

(Concern writ large on his face, Hassan Gul visits Big Aunt, who lies feverish and weak. Raishman, Zulaikhan's friend, arrives just then and greets Hassan Gul. She speaks, her voice filled with warmth:)

"Big Aunt, alone she may seem, no kin by her side,

But this village embraces her, in love as her guide.

Through daylight's warmth, company she receives,

As night descends, another villager weaves.

Medicine and food, a constant refrain,

Memories shared, a comforting chain.

Love's canopy shelters her, a haven so grand,

The village united, a helping hand."

"Speaking of love", she begins, a thoughtful pause,

"May I share a story, with your kind applause?"

(Raishman's words pique Hassan Gul's curiosity. He settles in with a nod, his voice gentle:)

"I'll stay a while, watch over Big Aunt's plight,

Speak freely, sister, share your story's light.

No need for permission, your words I'll embrace,

Let your voice fill this space."

(Raishman speaks in a hushed tone:)

"Hassan, dear brother," she begins with a sigh,

"This secret binds me, a truth yet to fly.

I seek your counsel, trust placed in your hand,

But a fear lingers, a sister's command.

Sharing secrets with brothers, a breach of the norm,

Can such a bond truly withstand the coming storm?"

(Hassan Gul speaks, his voice warm and sincere:)

"Sister, the village knows me not as one who spreads gossip,

No barber of whispers, nor drummer of strife.

Let go of doubts that may cloud your mind,

Your secret with me, a safe haven you'll find.

Speak freely, sister, your words I'll hold dear,

A brother in all but blood, your trust is held near."

(Raishman hesitates no longer:)

"My brother," she begins, "Zulaikhan's heart is astray,

Like reaching for sweetness from a bitter chinaberry's sway.

A proper lady, a change we now see,

A shadowed spirit, where once flowed glee.

Gone are the carefree days, a recluse she's become,

Her grief a heavy cloak, a solitary drum.

You seek the cause, the reason for her plight?

A cure you offer, to set things right?

Love's arrow has struck, a yearning so deep,

For Munshi she pines, in her dreams he does creep.

Though the mountain seems high, a path can be found,

Munshi's presence lingers, a truth to be unwound."

(Raishman finishes and drops her head . Hassan Gul is confused . His attention shifts towards Munshi, doting on Halima. After a moment , Hasan Gul gathers his composure. He outlines his plan:)

"My word stands firm, a promise I hold true,

Secrets I'll keep safe, sister, just as you.

To Munshi's ears, the truth I shall impart,

Though like water in a sieve, it may tear his heart.

Already consumed by love's burning pyre,

Where can I inflict this final, searing fire?

Your concern lies with Zulaikhan's plight,

But a heavier weight falls upon me tonight.

Lend me your ear, a sister's support I crave,

The tale of Zia unfolds, a story to save.

Grant me your full attention, for heaven's sake,

Let me reveal the truth, a burden to break."

(Raishman listens intently. Hassan Gul reveals a truth :)

"Truth, a singular force, by all readily known,

Yet Zulaikhan carves her own path, a love fully grown.

A love so fierce, unmatched in its might,

Perhaps for her beloved, she'd surrender her light.

But Munshi, his heart already claimed,

On Halima's image, his devotion is flamed. "

(Raishman reacts with a jolt of surprise as Halima's name is uttered. Her composure falters. Hassan Gul picks up the thread , his voice filled with reason:)

"Let's gather our thoughts, a solution we'll find,

If not today, then surely tomorrow, peace of mind.

Perhaps the answer lies within your own heart,

I'll speak to Munsshi, while you play your part.

Zulaikhan's worries, you can best address,

Together, we'll navigate this love's complex chess."

(Raishman's tone is thoughtful. She speaks:)

"Halima resides near Shah Gandal's abode,

Perhaps informing her of this tangled road.

Halima seeks guidance from no other soul,

But Shah Gandal's wisdom makes her heart whole."

(Hassan Gul nods in agreement. He praises

Shah Gandal:)

"Young she may be, yet wise beyond her years,

A seasoned spirit, dispelling all fears.

May Shah Gandal intervene, a beacon so bright,

To unravel this mess and set things aright.

This love's web, beyond Zulaikhan or Zia's hold,

We surrender to fate, a story yet untold."

(Hassan Gul shifts his focus, his voice filled with concern:)

"Big Aunt needs her medicine, a duty I heed,

Much work awaits me, sister, I must indeed "

(Hassan Gul gestures to leave, his voice carrying a hint of finality:)

"Take leave I must, with a heavy heart,

May we find a solution, a brand new start."

(Raishman and Shah Gandal are sitting on the roof of the latter's home.)

Raishman speaks, a glint within her eye,

"The path that winds to Musallah's crest so high,

See how it climbs, where verdant grasses lie?

A place I bid farewell as autumn passes by.

The air and sky with smoke begin to blend,

The wandering fakir, lost without a friend.

The muezzin calls, the day nears its end,

And flowers bloom in colors that transcend.

By day unseen, Ghulaman waits for night,

His magic flute will fill the air with light.

The potter's fire burns fierce, a fiery sight,

But Fakira's mill now brings a mournful plight.

Another love's disaster looms in sight,

A cruel fate brewing in the name of light."

Shah Gandal, wide-eyed, whispers with a smile,

"An eerie tale you weave, a curious style!"

"Oh, don't ask me to go into the detail,"

Raishman says, with a mischievous trail.

(Raishman relates the account in full. Shah Gandal bows her head, deep in thought. After a long pause, she lifts her head and asks Raishman:)

"Healthy and strong, with courage to spare,

No one will break our village's peaceful air.

Come, to a quiet spot, let's make our way,

There we can talk, and find a better say."

(They both go downstairs and settle in a room.)

Shah Gandal speaks, with a thoughtful air,

"Zulaikhan's a puzzle, a mystery to bear.

Halima's heart shouldn't be caught in this plight,

And Hassan Gul seeks someone out of sight.

He's an assistant to an assistant, you see,

A hidden figure in this strange decree.

We must form a plan, a strategy so grand,

To face this crisis, hand in helping hand.

Halima needs to know, the truth I'll impart,

Together we'll navigate this troubled heart."

(Shah Gandal makes a surprise visit to Halima in the late afternoon, airing casually:)

“Love's fire ignites the world anew,

Spring's gentle hand, Halima, beckons you.”

(Halima laughs heartily and says:)

“Flattered by gazes? That's a common plight,

Shah Gandal's heart, if lost, love holds the light.”

(Shah Gandal replies:)

“Presumption cast aside, my heart's untamed,

Cupid's arrow finds me yet unclaimed.

Love's full display, not silent sighs I'll bring,

But tell me, Halima, does spring make your heart sing?”

(Halima throws back her head and laughs.)

“Your Big Aunt wisdom pales beside your own,

Shah Gandal, where'd you learn this teaching tone?”

(With curiosity and concern, Shah Gandal speaks to Halima:)

“Why are you reluctant to unlid the secret before me, girl?

This story has spread, and the rumors unfurl.

What is this Munshi Zia to you, Halima?

Don't you fear God or His divine schema?

I am your friend; I will never leave you in the lurch,

But you keep me in darkness, an unusual search.”

(Halima gazes at Shah Gandal, her words filled with amazement.)

"Halima is an open book," she says to Shah Gandal,

“Munshi, a nabob of some land, holds sway, but why should I care?

For God's own realm, for your sweet sake, I'd gladly turn away,

My heart conceals , a poisoned drink, with words I cannot say.

Please be straightforward in your remarks, I implore,

Oblique statements are like air in a balloon—empty and sore."

(Shah Gandal recounts the rumors, leaving Halima uneasy. Meanwhile, Raishman talks with Zulaikhan, and Hassan Gul converses with Munshi. Zulaikhan remains silent, but Munshi tells Hassan Gul:)

“Halima's fire, a beauty so rare,

No other compares, a love beyond compare.

The universe itself placed in my hand,

For her, my heart, I'd choose the promised land.

She is my only love, a gem in the Baramula's crown,

No other beauty can pull my attention down.

I'll never return home without this flower of Eden,

Found deep in Darshi Forest, my heart's haven."

In forests deep, where axes ring,

Love's flames for Halima Zia does sing.

The more the pines with thunder fall,

The more his love begins to sprawl.

Lumberjack's toil, a wearying plight,

Yet love's sweet ache makes burdens light.

He guides the crew with watchful eye,

And smiles at fate's sweet irony.

“From Baramula's embrace, by fate's decree

Love for a hamlet girl burns strong in me.”

"First, beams to Pathroo," Zia's orders ring,

"Then heave them up to Sharhan, make them sing!

The logs, a mighty stack, for trucks to claim,

Mules haul the rest, but smarts avoid the blame.

Guys, have you noticed? The sawyers lead the fight,

Follow their spirit, with purpose, not blind might.

Mind it, no shirking, each man to his role,

Duty with honor, that's how we reach our goal.

No rest for Zia until your wages gleam,

A fair day's pay for every honest team."

(4)

(Nighttime, rain beats down outside. Halima's thoughts, for the first time, drift to Munshi's halo. She rises, walking to the mirror. Standing there, she ponders for long.)

“Rain lashes down, a symphony of night,

Darshi's laughter weeps in the fading light.

Earrings clamor, a chaotic beat,

Flowers whisper secrets, bittersweet.

My heart, a stranger, I've kept it veiled,

No yearning for what the hilltops hold concealed.

Melting snow on burning lips, unseen,

Love's fire ignites, a vibrant, unknown scene.

Goosebumps prickle, a foreign delight,

A warmth unfurls, banishing endless night.

My breath, a secret the wind can't reclaim,

Embers of feeling, a whispered name.

Love's melody, a song I never knew,

The bloom of youth awakens, whispers true."

(Standing there, musing on the subject she fails to take notice of Zulaikhan entering the room. Zulaikhan regards Halima.)

"Kaleidoscope dreams," a voice softly sighs,

"Knit them, Halima, unveil the truth in your eyes.

Why turn away from the mirror's gentle call?

Reflect, discover, let love enthrall."

(Startled, Halima looks back, as if caught red-handed. Zulaikhan continues with a knowing smile:)

"Through thick and thin, your sister, by your side,

A friend, a confidante, where feelings can confide.

Open your heart, dear Halima, set it free,

Why not some time for just you and me?

Strangers hold your trust, a curious trend,

Give me that faith, and see where it will bend."

(Halima, cheeks flushed, offers a hesitant defense:)

“Though fondness blooms, it's not a vice's snare,

God sees my heart, no darkness I can bear.

Fate's wheel spins on, ordained, a mystery,

No prophet's gift to glimpse what is to be.

Alone I hold these worries, a heavy weight,

To brood and sulk, a solitary state.”

(Zulaikhan leans in, her eyes eager with curiosity.)

“Hiding your heart, a battle you can't win,

What of these feelings? Let the truth begin.

Munshi's name unspoken, a secret kept,

Will you confess, or forever be swept?”

(Halima straightens, a flicker of defiance in her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she speaks:)

"Society's whispers hold no sway on me,

My heart's a fortress, love's not meant to be.

No blame attaches, my actions hold true,

Halima's spirit steers a course anew.

Shah Gandal's words first stirred this strange unrest,

A tale revealed, a truth put to the test.

Your name appears, a thread in love's design,

But hidden depths, unseen, remain entwined."

(Zulaikhan answers; her voice soft but pensive:)

"My heart belongs to the Munshi, a truth whispered far and wide,

Could I ever find another so kind, so true as my guide?

Tall and handsome, his words gentle and wise,

From a noble line, his generosity a prize.

He fills your spirit with a joyous delight,

And his wealth adds comfort, a future oh so bright."

(Halima watches Zulaikhan, a storm of emotions brewing within. Words gather on her tongue but remain unspoken. Next day;)

Halima seeks Shah Gandal, a troubled plea,

"Zulaikhan's changed, a different melody.

My love won't steal what my sister holds dear,

This stage I leave for her, devoid of fear.

Be kind, Shah Gandal, reveal the truth I see,

Let Hassan Gul's eyes behold reality.

Munshi must know the path my heart has paved,

Withdraw, dear friend, lest whispers are enslaved.

My actions threatened, a rumor's cruel sting,

Act swiftly, Shah Gandal, before new stories cling."

(In another corner, Zulaikhan confides in Raishman:)

"Halima's brow, a furrow of concern,

When love for Munshi's name, my words did burn.

My sister, my life, my spirit's counterpart,

This pain in Zulaikhan's own aching heart.

No sacrifice too great, for love's sweet sake,

Halima's well-being, the path I'll take."

(Raishman stares, taken aback by Zulaikhan's passionate outburst. She says:)

"Your words, a whirlwind, emotions unbound,

Reason forgotten, where logic cannot be found.

Fickleness your guide, a heart that veers,

This love, a tempest, fraught with coming tears.

Who'll save the reckless, lost in passion's maze?

A chameleon's soul, through shifting phases.

Let's see this clearer, a different light we'll cast,

Reconsider, Zulaikhan, before the die is cast."

(Zulaikhan's voice drops, a shadow of doubt creeping in;)

"I've weighed the cost," she murmurs, "the tangled threads I weave,

But can I truly let this love slip through my sleeve?"

(Before Zulaikhan can finish, Shah Gandal bursts in, interrupting their conversation. Zulaikhan throws him a surprised look. Shah Gandal says:)

"Why haven't I sought divine guidance, I say!

To find God's pleasure, light my chosen way!

Raishman's abode, my intended first stop,

But here you are, fate's fortunate drop!

May blessings abound, a joyous decree,

A mountain unmoved, yet hope you bring to me.

This tangled web, a solution we might find,

Your presence, dear Zulaikhan, a comfort to my mind."

(Zulaikhan scoffs:)

"Supernatural pronouncements, a curious game,

Encroaching on the Imam's sacred domain?

Lofty castles built on clouds, I presume,

Don't cloak the truth in riddles, make your meaning bloom."

(Shah Gandal replies:)

"A weight lifted! Sweet slumber awaits, I say,

As Zulaikhan and Munshi find love's sweet way!

A perfect match, fate's tapestry complete,

His heart enthralled, her every dream to meet!"

(Zulaikhan , eyes flashing:)

"Reciprocity matters, a love unreturned,

Zulaikhan's spirit will never be burned.

No discarded trinket, love's not a game,

Munshi's no deity, above love's burning flame.

Houri's embrace, if that's his desire,

My heart escapes unscathed, set aflame no higher.

No yearning for him, a truth I confess,

Fate's hand will guide me, for better or for less."

(It is the wedding of Imdad Khan’s daughter Sajawal. The joyous sounds are wafting through the air, but Zulaikhan's heart beats a different rhythm. Leaving the festivities behind, she heads towards Munshi's quarters . Shah Gandal, seemingly following the same path, arrives just as Munshi returns from prayers. Zulaikhan, with unwavering conviction, addresses the bewildered Munshi:)

"My heart's resolve, a fortress strong and true,

No compromise will bend what I pursue.

Love's path demands a challenge to embrace,

And Halima's well-being takes its rightful place.

My sister, my lifeblood, a bond beyond compare,

Her happiness my treasure, a love beyond compare.

All I possess, she claims it as her own,

My prayers, my spirit, forever on her throne.

In her bridal gown, by my own hand she'll shine,

Her palanquin adorned with love's fragrant vine."

(Tears glistening in her eyes, Zulaikhan wipes them away with her scarf and turns, walking resolutely away. Shah Gandal, left alone with Munshi, wastes no time:)

"A heart unyielding, her resolve remains,

Now bind yourself with a vow that sustains.

Place your hand upon my head, a solemn plea,

To Halima, unwavering loyalty!"

(Munshi, hand on heart and the other reverently placed on Shah Gandal's head, speaks with solemnity:)

"The fear of God never escapes me,

I promise you, swearing by the Divine decree.

No stone unturned, to make Halima happy I strive,

She will ever remain close to my heart, where her love will thrive.

Sorrow will never draw near to her, never shall she wear out with toil,

Halima will have the world at her feet, a life free from turmoil.

She will never risk danger, but at the cost of my life,

My life the forfeit, should danger ever be rife."

(Shah Gandal says:)

"Your word rings true, then lend an ear, my friend,

The dreams you hold, a destined future to ascend.

This day my vow I faithfully uphold,

When ladies return, their joyous march unfolds.

By my side, Halima, a sight to behold,

God's hand shall guide, your story yet untold."

(Shah Gandal's eyes widen with joy , as she utters the final words. A lone shadow stretches across the field in the distance. With a hurried departure, Shah Gandal scurries towards Imdad Khan's house. Munshi, left alone, turns towards his quarters. The shadow lengthens and takes form, revealing Ghulaman, the flute player. Recognizing him, Munshi waits as Ghulaman approaches him:)

“A slithering form in the inky night,

A chilling cry, a cackle of fright.

Fairy or phantom, a sight most strange,

A ghostly laugh, an unsettling change.

Whispers abound, of creatures of dread,

Vampires that feast on the blood of the dead.

Shifting shapes, they say, to deceive,

This thing, Munshi, surely, you'll believe!

A monstrous hunger, a never-ending need,

Devouring whole, a ghastly deed.

God's will be done, for my music's gone cold,

My flute falls silent, a story untold."

(Munshi raises a skeptical eyebrow at Ghulaman's tale:)

"Frightful tales spun, but hold no sway,

Why weave such shadows to lead me astray?

Fear not a phantom, a figment of night,

Village whispers, mere flickering light.

Fairies, enchanting, a heart's sweet desire,

Darshi's fair maiden sets my soul on fire.

Let us depart, the path I will show,

To your doorstep, Ghulaman, if you wish to go."

(Zulaikhan strides into Imdad Khan's house, the festive energy washing over her. Ignoring the vibrant chatter, she directs her determined gaze towards the other girls, uttering:)

"Sajawal's beauty, a sight to behold,

A radiant joy, more precious than gold!

Bring forth the henna, let artistry bloom,

Her hands adorned, dispelling any gloom.

Then fetch the dholki, let the rhythm ignite,

A joyous melody, taking flight!"

(A mischievous Shah Gandal enters the house. She announces:)

"Zulaikhan, unleash your drumming might,

Let the beat pulsate, ignite the joyful night!

Bride's cheeks aflame with vibrant delight,

No escape today from our playful plight!

Thump that dholki, let the rhythm take hold,

Halima too shall join the story untold!"

(Halima, a playful smile dancing on her lips, interjects:)

"Dance I shall, but not alone I'll roam,

My Masi's side, a comforting home.

Sajawal's mother, join the joyous throng,

Let laughter echo, where we all belong!"

(Laughter fills the room . Sajawal's mother beams:)

"My darling Halima, for Sajawal's delight,

I'll dance with wilder joy than anyone in sight!

But hold a moment, a guest I must invite,

Our dear Big Aunt, to make the celebration just right.

Feast and laughter, let the merriment flow,

Your songs and verses, blessings they'll bestow.

Though Halima, your mother hasn't graced us yet,

Big Aunt's arrival, a moment of regret."

(Halima replies :)

"Big Aunt will weep, a farewell bittersweet,

As Sajawal embarks on a love so complete.

But fret not, Auntie, mother's on her way,

Soon to join us in the joyous display.

Raishman, lend a hand, the henna I require,

Black eye powder too, to set our hearts on fire!"

(Sajawal's aunt, seated nearby, leans forward with a knowing smile:)

"Behold the treasures, a dazzling display,

Silver necklet, golden cuffs to light the way.

This nose ring, chosen with Sajawal's own hand,

A symbol of beauty, forever to withstand.

Gilded anklets chime with each graceful stride,

A golden chain, with beaded adornments to confide.

Double loops on this necklace, a sight to admire,

This tikka a spark, setting beauty afire.

Bangles from her uncle, a gift ever true,

A dowry's bounty, displayed just for you.

Though opinions may vary, traditions hold sway,

Customs of the day, lighting up this special day."

(Bustling with purpose, Sajawal's mother enters the room, ushering in the Big Aunt. She directs her attention to the younger girls:)

"Come now, girls, no time for idle chatter,

Assigned tasks await, a bustling matter!

Who'll climb the stairs, the oil lamp to ignite?

Children's needs first, a priority so bright!

The groom's procession nears, their arrival soon,

To welcome them with grace, a race against the moon!"

(In another corner, Munshi Ziauddin engages in hushed conversation with Hassan:)

"Prayers ascend, dear Hassan, for your blessed domain,

A haven of peace, where paradise shall reign.

Yet fate's cruel hand leaves me in doubt's embrace,

Will fortune smile upon me in this sacred space?

Tonight, the ladies' joyous march unfolds,

Through streets I dare not tread, a story yet untold.

Halima walks amongst them, a vision so bright,

My heart yearns to burn, a beacon in the night.

A gamble with fate, a chance I must take,

To glimpse her beauty, for her sake.

A fleeting word, a whisper in the throng,

Perhaps this path will right the painful wrong."

(Hassan Gul, nodding , replies:)

"A long shot it may be, but hope remains alight,

So take your chance, Munshi, and fight the fading night.

Friendship's a treasure, a bond that holds so true,

And for a friend in need, there's nothing I wouldn't do.

Until the parade's joyful songs draw near,

I'll chase away the gloom, dispelling every fear.

Await here, friend, while I climb and ignite,

The lamp on the rooftop, a beacon burning bright."

(The pre-wedding cavalcade is returning from Imdad Khan’s house. Munshi Zia, sitting in the parlor of Hassan Gul and viewing outside, is waiting for Shah Gandal. The procession passes the front of the house, turns towards the water spring. Soon after Munshi hears the voice of Shah Gandal. He opens the door coming face to face with Shah Gandal and Halima. Shah Gandal resting her eyes on Munshi, addresses Halima:)

"No furrowed brow, a smile instead,

This is Munshi Zia, fate has led."

(Halima greets Munshi Zia ; her voice barely audible . Shah Gandal then says:)

“Munshi's love burns bright, your name upon his tongue,

A constant echo, a love forever young.

Helping hands find favor in God's discerning eye,

Soothe a traveler's blister, or point them to the sky.

But know this, Halima, love's a fiery sea,

A challenge to embrace, a test for you and he.

Your hearts may beat in rhythm, a secret, sweet refrain,

Yet fear, like icy layers, holds your love in chain.

This love story's path has hit a sudden snag,

But with your gentle counsel, a new course it can wag.

Listen to his words, offer wisdom and your grace,

While I attend a task, a short and fleeting space."

(Silence descends, heavy and thick as the night air. Shah Gandal's puns hang in the space between them. Halima opens her mouth to speak, but no sound escapes. A bead of sweat rolls down her forehead, mirroring the frantic rhythm of her heart. Munshi Ziauddin stands frozen, his own heart a drum echoing through the stillness of Darshi Forest. Finally, after an eternity of silence, Halima breaks the suffocating quiet:)

"I bid farewell, though morning's light is nigh,

To wedding festivities, I must bid goodbye.

Shah Gandal, your playful spirit, a constant surprise,

Leaving me stranded, with bewildered sighs.

With haste she departed, her purpose unknown,

Like a seed carried by the wind, swiftly flown."

(Halima's voice fades as she walks away, leaving Munshi Ziauddin speechless. After a few hesitant steps, she turns back, a fleeting glance towards him before continuing on her path. The weight of the

encounter crushes Munshi, his energy sapped. He collapses onto the ground, muttering to himself:)

"Shah Gandal, a whirlwind, a force to behold,

Today, emotions like an ocean, a story untold.

My tongue, a traitor, failed to speak my heart's desire,

Yet a glimpse of her beauty set my soul on fire.

Halima, so near, a dream come true,

With my blessing, she returned home, a vision in blue.

Why then did her gaze pierce me like a dart?

Could her heart hold a flame, mirroring mine, a work of art?

This vision of Halima, a sight so bright,

Shall forever be etched in my soul, a beacon of light."

(Days bleed into weeks, a heavy weight settling upon Halima and Munshi Ziauddin. Love-stricken, and longing for each other , both yearn for a way to bridge the gap. One evening, Halima arrives at Shah Gandal's doorstep, a picture of despair.)

“My desires, like a fleeting dream, forever out of reach,

Restless nights upon my bed, sleep offers no release.

Thorns pierce my comfort, cinders fill my rest,

A constant sting that whispers of a burdensome test.

My father's honor, a thread I tightly hold,

Yet darkness surrounds me, a story left untold.

Lost and adrift, I seek your guiding hand,

To navigate this storm, and reach a promised land."

(As Halima pours out her heart, Shah Gandal steps forward.)

"Beauty blooms upon you, Halima, like a pomegranate in spring,

A vibrant season awakening, love's sweet song you sing.

Yet thorns of sorrow pierce your joy, a fragrant love's embrace,

But hold, dear girl, there's time for laughter, not just sorrow's chase!

A precious gift bestowed by fate, a love to hold so

dear,

Why tremble then, with unfounded, flickering fear?

Halima, listen close, let wisdom guide your way,

My counsel heed, and greet a brighter, sunlit day."

(The next day, late morning, Halima approaches her mother asking her:)

"To the pond I venture, where cattle thirst for cool relief,

Dishes await, and chores I must achieve.

Upon my return, a load of grass I'll bear,

Zulaikhan, dear friend, the beds, if you would spare."

(A secret rendezvous unfolds beneath the shade of an ancient tree by the pond. Shah Gandal, ever the

facilitator, ensures privacy as Halima and Munshi Ziauddin find themselves face-to-face. Munshi speaks, voice thick with longing:)

"Days crawl by, each an eternity's weight,

Tears dampen my pleas, yearning for your gate.

Life's spark dwindles, a flame losing its might,

My spirit wanes, devoid of your guiding light.

Halima, you hold my essence in your thrall,

No other thought can penetrate this wall.

My heart beats true, intentions pure and bright,

All I possess, I offer, bathed in love's light.

Let me find solace in your raven hair's embrace,

Hand in hand, let love find its rightful place."

(Halima replies, eyes filled with unshed tears:)

"To hold your hand, a wish that sets me free,

Only the heavens bear witness, my love for thee.

No other soul has peered into your heart's domain,

And for your love alone, my prayers refrain.

No suitor dared to cross my destined way,

My heart, untouched by love's sweet, fiery sway.

My thoughts, a garden untainted by desire,

Love, a foreign concept, setting my soul afire.

Yet now, the rhythm of day and night feels strange,

A rebellious heart, drawn to a love's deranged range."

(Munshi , emboldened by her words, reaches out and takes Halima's hand. His voice trembles with emotion:)

"These ancient stones, no mere ruins they seem,

But a palace of love, a radiant dream.

Eden pales in comparison, Halima, my own,

A hidden paradise, for us alone.

Let these weathered walls become our sanctuary, a love unfurled,

Where we can soar above the mundane, a love song for the world.

Your presence, Halima, transforms this barren space,

A king's throne pales before your enchanting grace.

My heart aches to reveal the depths of my desire,

To paint a portrait of love, set your soul on fire.

The heavens themselves bow to your beauty's might,

If only I possessed the power to express it right."

(Munshi Ziauddin gently caresses Halima's hand. Her gaze meets his, a silent language spoken in their eyes. She presses her lips to the spot he stroked. Just at that time a voice pierces the stillness. Shah Gandal's unmistakable tones ring out. Halima says:)

"The current nearly swept me away,

But fate intervened, another day.

Let go, Munshi, Shah Gandal's searching call,

We must postpone this, but hope shall stand tall.

With a touch of luck, a chance we'll seize,

Until then, beneath this tree, a love finds ease."

(Halima, a familiar figure by now, arrives at the pond under the guise of watering the cattle. Yet, her eyes scan the area until they find Munshi Ziauddin waiting beneath the shade of the old tree. One day, Munshi , his voice filled with apprehension, discloses:)

"My heart aches with a burden I must bear,

A journey to Punjab beckons, a heavy affair.

Weeks may stretch into months, a cruel fate to endure,

Distance will test our love, a trial to be pure.

Each passing day without you, an eternity's plight,

The city's vastness, a lonely, echoing night.

The thought of separation severs my very core,

Only the dream of forever keeps me wanting more.

No release from your gentle hold do I seek,

Beyond your presence, my ambitions grow weak.

With your blessing, I'd make preparations, though loath,

My career and purpose rest on your whispered oath."

(Halima's response hangs heavy in the air:)

"'Love's labor lost,' the proverb whispers true,

Especially when strangers come into view.

East and West, two worlds forever apart,

Water alone cannot nurture a blooming heart.

Words of wisdom passed down through the years,

Forces beyond my control, filled with unspoken fears."

(Munshi says:)

"By the heavens above, your doubts pierce me like a knife!

Misplaced affections? My very essence revolves around your life!

Never, Halima, think me capable of betrayal's sting,

My heart, my soul, forever to yours I cling.

Before this journey parts us, I lay my dreams bare,

No frivolous venture, this path I must dare.

Hold my dreams close, a treasure to keep,

For your beauty's tapestry, my soul yearns ever so deep."

(Halima, tears shimmering in her eyes, replies:)

"Halima, no flickering lamp, no wick, no dying ember,

But a blossoming flower, a heart that will forever remember.

Fate's cruel hand intertwined our paths, a tangled skein,

I press on with grit, yet doubt lingers, a gnawing pain.

What reward for this relentless chase? A life in despair,

My very existence hangs by a thread, a burden too hard to bear."

(Seeing the anguish in Halima's tear-filled eyes, Munshi speaks with newfound urgency:)

"This world itself, I'd abandon for your sake,

My aspirations, readily at stake.

But understand, Halima, every path has a bend,

True strength resides within, not pressure to contend.

God's grace will guide us, fear not, my love,

Here I'll remain, a different course to prove.

A humble venture, a new start I shall make,

All for your love, a sacrifice I gladly take."

(Halima, a sliver of hope flickering in her eyes, questions him nonetheless:)

"A solemn vow I seek, a promise to hold dear,

Will other women's charms ever draw you near?

When will you return? Tell me, set a date,

A steadfast promise to ease this painful state."

(Munshi Ziauddin, his voice resolute, raises his hand in oath:)

"By the heavens above, a month marks my return,

My current ties, a flame destined to burn.

Your life blooms bright, a promise etched in time,

True love endures, even through trials sublime.

As I depart, will you grant me one last plea?

Place your hand upon my heart, a symbol for all to see."

(Halima, her hope ignited by Munshi's vow, hesitantly places her hand over his heart. He mirrors her gesture, their fingers intertwined for a fleeting moment. Suddenly, the idyllic scene shatters. Ghulaman, appearing like a phantom from

the foliage, lets out a startled cry. His eyes widen in disbelief as he witnesses their intimate pose. Munshi and Halima recoil, a jolt of shock coursing through them. Ghulaman, pale and trembling, turns on his heels and flees the scene as if pursued by unseen demons. He sprints towards Kala's shop. Bursting through the door, Ghulaman throws himself at Kala:)

"Disaster looms, brother! Darshi Forest is doomed, I say!

God's wrath descends, a price we must pay!"

(Kala, amusement dancing in his eyes, erupts in laughter, saying :)

"A curse-monger you've become, a prophet of despair!

Is there a plague worse than your presence, a burden harder to bear?"

(Ghulaman retorts:)

"Kala, your name a mere shadow, for darkness lies within,

I wager you'll soon witness the truth of my sin!

Sikandar, a brother in name, but blood ties us tight,

Yet his daughter's virtue walks a path of night!"

(Kala's laughter dies in his throat, replaced by a simmering rage. His eyes narrow as he fixes Ghulaman with a steely gaze.)

"Hemp-laced madness clouds your judgment, it seems,

Your words, a poisonous venom, spewing from broken dreams!

Silence that wagging tongue, keep your venom confined,

Can't you utter something decent, leave slander behind?"

(Undeterred , Ghulaman persists:)

"Let rage simmer another time, Kala, for tears are due,

This act of transgression tarnishes Darshi Forest anew.

Witness to a scene both shocking and profane,

Weep with me, brother, for honor's stain!"

(Ghulaman elaborates, his words painting a lurid picture. Kala's anger escalates, transforming into a storm of fury. Ghulaman exclaims:)

"Hear me out, Kala, for honesty's my guide,

No rumor monger I, nor in falsehood do I confide.

I wouldn't sully reputations with lies so base,

This holy text, my witness, on truth I place.

Munshi Ziauddin, consumed by desire's flame,
May tread a path forbidden, besmirching our name.
Darshi Forest, untouched by elopement's stain,
Now faces potential ruin, a lover's shameful gain."

(Kala, overwhelmed by a mixture of shame and helplessness, can only clench his fists. A veil of anguish clouds his vision. His mind races, searching for a solution, but finds only darkness. What counsel can he offer Ghulaman, lost in his own labyrinth of despair? Left unanswered, Ghulaman takes his leave, the weight of his "revelations" slung over his shoulder. He sets off towards Sava the potter's kiln, eager to spread his tale to a new audience.)

(5)

Munshi Ziauddin, Pusnjab-bound, left a void in his wake,

Laughter and joy, banished by this bitter ache.

Love's melody intertwined with yearning's sting,

Halima adrift, a sorrowful, lonely thing.

His distant clime stretched like an endless night,

As whispers turned vicious, a chilling blight.

No escape from sorrow's suffocating hold,

Her spirit drained, a story yet untold.

The weight of despair, a tide too strong to bear,

Heart in hand, she fled, seeking solace in the air.

Up the mountain's ridge, a desperate climb,

Tears a torrent unleashed, echoing through time.

Fading Echoes

"The cruel shears of sorrow, they tear at my core,

A searing pain, unbearable to ignore.

Munshi, my love, return with haste, I implore,

For God watches over us, and hope lingers evermore.

The cruel shears of sorrow, they pierce me anew,

Oh, Munshi, why tarry? Let whispers accrue.

The villagers' taunts, a storm I shall weather through,

As long as you return, my love, ever true.

The cruel shears of sorrow, they snip at my heart,

My nerves set on edge, torn and ripped apart.

Come quickly, my love, ease this searing smart,

For in your presence, solace I impart.

The cruel shears of sorrow, they wound me so deep,

To Baramula, take me with you, where dreams gently sleep.

In your arms I'll rest, my raven tresses unbound,

A love unconfined, on fertile ground.

The cruel shears of sorrow, they bind me in chains,

A shack on the mountaintop, where passion ordains.

Your love, my guiding star, dispelling life's rains,

A haven for us, to ease these gnawing pains.

The cruel shears of sorrow, they nail me to the cross,

My cries echo, a story of love's cruel loss.

Yet, every fiber of my being whispers your name,

A unwavering flame, forever aflame.

The cruel shears of sorrow, they tear at my core,

A searing pain, unbearable to ignore.

Munshi, my love, return with haste, I implore,

For God watches over us, and hope lingers evermore."

(Halima's condition worsens with the passage of time. One day her mother approaches her husband. Her voice laced with concern:)

"Tell me, what ails our Halima, a shadow in her eyes?

A healer's touch, perhaps, before her spirit dies.

They say a skilled physician resides below,

Mustaqeem by name, his knowledge sure to flow.

A mere pulse reading, his diagnosis keen,

Uprooting illness with a potent, healing scene.

He crafts the cure himself, a potion to restore,

And sleep, a balm, at his remedies' core.

Heed my words, dear husband, don't let this wait,

Seek out the apothecary, before it's sealed by fate!

Or are you gripped by fear, a sickness to embrace,

That venturing forth might bring illness to your space?"

(Sikandar, bristling with irritation, responds to his wife's worries:)

"Your nagging words, a devil's symphony, old hag!

Possessed by a mischievous djinn, your endless chatter flags!

Silence this nonsense, let's not waste another breath,

To the apothecary Halima goes, to escape the clutches of death.

My staff and blanket, quickly fetch,

A bottle and your pouch's sketch."

(Halima's mother retorts:)

"Audacious claims you dare to make, a husband so bold!

Speak of deposits entrusted to my care, a story to be told!

Did you ever grace my hands with a single coin, a rupee to hold?

Don't shy away from the truth, your stinginess unfolds!

Every suggestion I make, a joke to your disdain,

Do you paint me a miser, a shrew, devoid of reason's reign?

Vast farmlands you possess, wealth and village at your command,

While I? I recite God's name, the only solace in this barren land!"

(Halima's mother, her voice; a mix of anger and resignation, reaches into her pouch, pulling out money:)

"A broken vessel you are, a bottomless pit, I see,

Oblivious to hardships, a storm you cannot foresee.

My careful savings, the lifeblood of this home,

While you squander your earnings, a place where money never roams."

(Sikandar, clutching the money, sets off for the healer with Halima in tow. The healer examines her carefully, then prescribes a course of treatment:)

" Twice a day, this medicine take,

Morning and evening, with creamy milk for goodness' sake.

A week's regimen, unwavering and true,

Avoid cold water, for healing anew.

Her youth, a flickering lamp in twilight's embrace,

Demands gentle care, a delicate space.

Pigeon's tender flesh, a potent elixir some say,

Often advised to chase illness away.

Mornings, mix mamekh in warm milk's embrace,

And ratan jog at night, before slumber's space."

(The apothecary pauses , takes a look at Halima, then continuous:)

"No excess fat clogs her veins, a healthy form,

No sign of rash or pimple, weathering any storm.

This course should offer relief, a path to mend,

If symptoms persist, then return, my friend."

(Their hopes rise, only to be dashed. Halima remains unmoved, refusing the medicine.)

But Halima, an enigma hard to decode,

Rejected the healer's touch, a heavy load.

Each folded paper, a promise of cure,

Remained unopened, locked in silent duress.

No physical ailment plagued her, no disease's hold,

The healer's potions, a story yet untold.

Love's unrequited sting, a wound beyond compare,

No poultice or herb could mend the despair.

Her heart, a locked chamber, secrets held tight,

No solace found in the fading light.

Fate's cruel grip, an invisible chain,

Leaving Halima adrift in endless pain.

(Sikandar, helpless, becomes a regular visitor to the apothecary, while Halima's mother witnesses her daughter's decline.)

Halima's mother clutched at straws, despair her guide,

As her daughter's vitality seemed to wane inside.

Paleness washed over Halima's once vibrant face,

Feeding a mother's fear, a desperate race.

Consumption's grip, or a spirit's hold,

The mother's anxieties began to unfold.

Sleep became a distant dream, a mother's torment,

Her heart ablaze, a love's lament.

Sikandar, oblivious, puffed on his hookah's embrace,

A symphony of coughs, a careless pace.

His self-absorption, a constant thorn,

Fueling the chaos, night and morn.

Halima's silent pain, a world unseen,

While Sikandar's coughs, a maddening scene.

"Forget the potions," the mother cried in despair,

"Holy verses whispered, a mother's prayer!"

The healer failed, hope dwindled to a spark,

To the prayer leader they'd turn, seeking a talisman in the dark.

(Sikandar, hurls accusations at his wife:)

"A cacophony of gossip, a burden you bear,

Every word an arrow, seeking a quarrel to share.

Idleness consumes your days, a life devoid of grace,

Fear of God a stranger to your haggard face.

Prying eyes and wagging tongues, a constant refrain,

Engaging with you, an exercise in vain.

Your voice, a harbinger of silence, a hush descends,

Even the rooftop crows, their heads cocked, where the tirade ends.

Like a pervasive scent, you infest Darshi's air,

An illness that plagues the village, a burden to bear.

You cackle like a hen, a restless, brooding soul,

Have you no fear of God, who claims every living whole?

Not a single villager finds peace from your stinging tongue,

Calm your venomous words, for a wrong has been done!”

(In another place, Halima is sitting across from Shah Gandal. The latter asks the former:)

"Halima, dear child, your love consumes you whole,

A wasting illness that takes its toll.

The mountain of despair casts a menacing shade,

Rise up, young one, or your spirit will fade.

This burden you carry, a self-inflicted plight,

Love, a mere illusion, a mirage in the light.

A trial it is, a tempestuous sea,

A delusion that holds you in captivity.

Youth's folly, a fleeting spark,

A madman's dream, lost in the dark.

Insubstantial, a whimsical flight,

This dangerous swing, a path towards endless night.

Love's fools drown in regret's bitter tide,

A jilted heart, forever denied.

Riches to rags, a love-struck fate,

Homes shattered, love's cruel dictate.

Majestic trees, felled by love's blind embrace,

A lover's heart, lost in a vacant space.

A swan song, love's final decree,

Eradicate this evil, and finally be free!"

(Halima, her gaze fixed on an invisible point, speaks with a quiet conviction that contrasts Shah Gandal's harsh words:)

"Love, Shah Gandal, is a concept vast and grand,

Like snow-capped Musallah's peak, a beacon in the land.

It transcends the seasons' grip, neither scorching heat nor biting cold,

A constant presence, a story yet untold.

A blossoming apricot tree, a sight to behold,

Unclaimed, untamed, a love story yet to unfold.

A winding path leading upwards, a meadow bathed in light,

A patch of dewy grass, a haven ever bright.

A spring by the wayfarer's path, a wellspring crystal clear,

An oil press churning, a fragrance that can enthrall your ear.

Autumn's final whisper, a beauty untold,

A moonlit Shogran night, a story to unfold.

Winter's chill soothed by love's warm embrace,

Without it, darkness reigns, a desolate space.

A walnut's shade, a haven of peace,

Love, my cradle, my refuge, my release.

The answer to prayers whispered by saints so true,

For God is love, and love yearns for Him too."

(Munshi, laden with gifts for Halima and Hassan Gul, returns to Darshi Forest. Joy warms his heart at the prospect of reunion, only to be shattered by Hassan Gul's account of the villagers' scorn. Munshi crushed by despair directs his plea to his God :)

"Oh, Nourisher of all, the village turns its back,

A sworn enemy, their anger on a track.

I'm dust beneath their feet, ostracized and alone,

Not a single voice raised, a compassionate tone.

Halima, my love, a yearning that consumes,

This longing, a harbinger of my coming doom.

A lost bird, adrift in a foreign land,

This place holds no solace, an unwelcome sand.

No roots bind me here, each breath a borrowed thing,

Hell's fire ignited, the villagers sing.

A chorus of hatred, a storm I can't withstand,

Lord, hear my desperate plea, a stranger's demand.

Shield Halima's honor, a fragile flame,

Preserve her from the whispers that soil her name."

(The first snowflakes of winter paint Musallah white, a blanket of pristine cold. Munshi, his prayers echoing in the quiet night, finally yields to sleep. But his slumber is short-lived. A soft rapping at the door pierces the stillness. Munshi jolts awake, his heart pounding. He rushes to the door, throwing it open in a single motion. And there, bathed in the moonlight, stands Halima. For a moment, Munshi is frozen, his face strewn with disbelief. Is this a dream, a cruel trick of his heart

seized with her beauty? Halima, her voice husky with emotion, speaks:)

"Musallah, cloaked in winter's first kiss,

The biting cold, a knife against my abyss.

Winds howl, and frost nips, a merciless bite,

But my loyalty to you burns ever so bright.

I've been scorched by fire for a month's long pain,

My heart, a furnace, yearning in vain.

Do you understand, Munshi, my love's decree?

The village may rage, but my love sets me free.

No hand dares rise to tear us apart,

God's shield protects our love, a fortress in our hearts.

No need for empty gestures, no bowing low,

The villagers' anger, a fire with nowhere to go."

(Munshi, his heart overflowing with joy, ushers Halima inside. Her body trembles with the lingering cold. He gently guides her to his bed and drapes a warm quilt over her. He says:)

"This night, etched in memory forevermore,

And the dawn that follows, a precious chore.

My heart overflows, yet aches with a weary weight,

To see you here, a solace that mitigates.

Your presence, a balm to my troubled soul,

A paradise found, a story to be told.

This ecstasy, a double-edged blade,

Lest it consume me, in a love parade.

The icy wind, a relentless sting,

Chills my bones, a bitter song to sing.

The villagers' scorn, a heavy cloak,

Every move suspect, a burden to revoke.

But let's leave woes behind, for tonight is ours,

No need for bitterness, to cloud these precious hours.

Look upon these gifts, a token of my love,

Garments and jewels, sent from Pindi above.

Earrings that shimmer, a braid adorned with pride,

Pendants that dangle, secrets they confide.

A mirror reflecting your beauty so bright,

Lipstick's touch, a promise in the night.

Henna's intricate designs, a love story untold,

Kohl's dark whisper, a tale to unfold.

Each trinket chosen with care, a silent vow,

My love for you, Halima, burns ever now."

(Munshi, his eyes filled with adoration, lays out the gifts before Halima. She gazes at them, a sense of wonder washing over her. She says:)

"Unfurl my braid, Munshi, let it cascade free,

A waterfall of ebony, flowing down to my knee.

With gentle hands, grace my finger with this band,

A golden promise, a love that will forever withstand.

A touch of color upon my lips, a hint of red,

Let me see how it blooms, a desire long fed.

The earrings beckon, a whisper in my ear,

Let me adorn myself, cast away all fear."

(Halima's voice, an invisible tether, pulls at Munshi He moves towards her. Together, they find refuge in a secluded corner of the room. The night outside rages on, a tempestuous clash between darkness and the skeletal trees clawing at the sky. The icy wind howls a mournful tune, a stark contrast to the warmth blossoming within.)

(After the late afternoon prayer, Moulvi Sakhawat approaches Sikandar. He pulls him aside and says:)

"May my words not cause undue distress,

But whispers taint Darshi Forest, I confess.

God alone holds dominion over my soul,

Yet these rumors take their toll.

Halima, your daughter, a precious gem,

But whispers swirl, casting shadows on them.

I cannot fight every baseless claim,

Sikandar, a gentleman's duty you must reclaim.

Speak to Halima, let her truth unfold,

This iceberg's tip, a story yet untold.

A watchful eye, a father's role to play,

Protect your hearth, lest darkness hold its sway."

(Moulvi Sakhawat's words hang heavy in the air as Sikandar leaves. Dejection weighs him down, leaving him speechless. He shuffles home, his shoulders slumped. A single glance at Halima passes between them, devoid of connection.

Sikandar retreats to the inner part of the house, collapsing onto the bed like a deflated figure. The fire crackling outside seems to mock his inner turmoil. Halima's mother enters, her eyes falling on Sikandar sprawled on the cot. She is unable to fight off her exasperation:)

"There you sprawl, like some chronic ill,

A sagging cot holding a form so still.

Winter bites, yet the house stands bare,

No fuel to ward off the frosty air.

Do you grasp the weight I bear alone?

Endless chores, a burden on my bone.

Sorrows and shocks have aged me far,

Inside and out, a constant war.

Daughters demand a watchful eye,

Yet you, a burden I cannot deny.

Not only my duties, but neighbors too,

A legacy of respect, what are we to do?

Were you a man, a backbone true,

Responsibilities fulfilled, what a sight to view!"

(Sikandar is already under pressure. His wife's scathing remarks infuriate him. He throws back a venomous response:)

"Enough of virtue's charade, your pious claim,

A burning ember, not a loving flame!

Better a cobblestone, cold and unfeeling,

Than you, my wife, my constant reeling!"

His anger flared, a storm about to break,

Harsh accusations, a bitter mistake.

"Concerned for Halima? A flimsy guise,

While whispers spread, with malicious lies.

No illness binds her, a deeper scheme's afoot,

Question the girl yourself, beneath this very roof!"

(Sikandar reveals the secret, his voice, a mix of anger and fear. The color drains from his wife's face. She rushes outside, desperation creeping into her voice. She addresses her:)

"A candy store, my daughter? Since when, pray tell?

Halima! They whisper you've reached womanhood's well.

Those earrings jingle, a story yet untold,

Your lips like embers, a secret they unfold.

What mischief brews, child? Speak the truth to me,

Swear by the heavens, set my heart at ease!"

(Halima stands frozen, the weight of her mother's words pressing down on her. Aching silence hangs heavy in the air. Her mother calls her again:)

"Your father withers, his health in decline,

And I, a weary soul, nearing life's end's sign.

When will the Angel of Mercy take me away?

This earthly burden, oh God, I can't delay.

Halima, child, your hasty actions sting,

Your father, a saint, with a virtuous ring.

No harsh words have ever crossed his lips,

He seeks solace in prayer, his spirit never dips.

Disrupt his peace, and your happiness will fade,

A bitter harvest of sorrow, a heavy braid. "

(Halima's heart aches for her mother's pain, but the weight of her own secret love keeps her silent. The words are a fresh torment, a plea that tears at her already wounded spirit. Halima’s thoughts are in a panicked stream:)

"How can I confess, with my own heart ablaze?

This pain is a wildfire, scorching through a maze.

My love for him, a compass guiding my way,

Yet the ground beneath me crumbles day by day.

How can I defend myself, a house built on sand?

Each accusation a blow, leaving me unmanned.

Lala Sikandar, consumed by dark fears,

Might his anger spark a future filled with tears.

My parents stand with the village, a united front,

While Zia, my love, bears the brunt of their brunt.

He may be ostracized, yet in my heart he holds sway,

Like Saifulmaluk, a prince lighting my way.

No escape, no turning back, a path carved in stone,

My weary soul feels utterly alone."

(Overwhelmed by despair, tears stream down her face. She retreats to a secluded place. The weight of her situation threatening to consume her.)

(One day, Munshi, after briefing his men in Darshsi Forest, heads to the bungalow atop Musallah to oversee the logging work. That same evening, news reaches Zulaikhan of suspicious village boys inquiring about him at his quarters. The laborers, sensing danger, manage to deflect the boys. Night falls, casting long shadows across the house. Zulaikhan, her brow furrowed with worry, seeks out Halima , conveying her concern:)

"Sister, if fate had bestowed a brother's embrace,

We wouldn't face this relentless disgrace.

A brother, a shield against slander's sting,

His presence, a deterrent, a warning to sing.

No whispers would dare taint our family's name,

His strength a bulwark, safeguarding our claim.

Our father wouldn't crumble, his spirit subdued,

Nor would illness steal his health, misunderstood.

Mother's heart wouldn't break under the weight,

Of whispers and rumors, a bitter fate.

But Munshi, alone in this hostile terrain,

How long can his resolve withstand the strain?

The arrows of gossip, the barbs of disdain,

When will this relentless onslaught wane?"

(Halima, unable to bear the weight of Zulaikhan's words, chooses silence. Sleep, however, offers no solace. Both sisters drift off, burdened by their anxieties about the uncertain future. In the morning Halima approaches Zulaikhan and says:)

"Sister, a nightmare plagued my sleep last night,

A chilling vision, bathed in an eerie light.

Musallah, transformed into a dark, gaping cave,

Where I lay crumpled, a prisoner in its grave.

A mound of snow, a chilling, frozen bed,

A bag of fire upon my head.

A voice, cold and cruel, whispered in my ear,

'The lady seems to be dead,' a sentence filled with fear.

I thought, perhaps a human with a malicious glee,

For never has Musallah been such a sight to see.

Too weak to rise, to check this ghastly scene,

Frozen in place, Zulaikhan, a terrifying dream.

Then another voice echoed, sharp and stark,

'The monster approaches, leaving its mark.'

'This monster will devour you whole,' it said,

Terror coursed through me, filling me with dread.

A young deer approached, a fleeting glimpse of grace,

But offered no solace, leaving an empty space.

Then Hassan Gul appeared, a sinister guise,

Draped me in a garland of burning embers, a searing surprise.

A serpent slithered nearby, a threat unseen,

And a gaping abyss behind, a terrifying scene.

I woke with a gasp, bathed in cold sweat,

This nightmare, Zulaikhan, I can't forget."

(Zulaikhan consoles her keeping her fears to herself. Meanwhile Halima's uncle Qalandar visits Hassan Gul at his residence and says:)

"This village burns, a pyre of discontent,

Munshi should flee, or face dire punishment!

Let him depart, this scorching, hostile land,

No tears will fall in Darshi's desert sand.

Why tempt his fate, this reckless, foolish stride?

We are the roots, here we forever reside.

He's but a stranger, a weed on fertile ground,

Get him out, Hassan, before trouble is found!"

(Thereafter, cutting short a long hiatus , Qalandar stomps into his brother Sikandar's presence, his face a mask of grim determination , as words roll out from his mouth:)

"Halima, she's like my own daughter, you see,

My heart bleeds for her, pure as it can be.

Respect is your due, brother, that much is true,

For family's honor, I'd sacrifice anew.

This turmoil, this scandal that engulfs your name,

I can't stand silent, fanning the flames.

Together we'll face it, whatever the cost,

This tangled mess won't come at your expense, at any cost!

Over my dead body will this chaos unfold,

I come not for idle talk, but action bold!"

(Qalandar's passionate words strike a chord within Sikandar. The weight of the situation, previously borne alone, seems to lessen with his brother's support. In a rare display of emotion, Sikandar pulls Qalandar into a tight embrace, and says:)

“Shame binds me tight, a cloak I cannot shed,

Whispers burn like fire, a crown turned to dread”.

(Shame and despair hang heavy in the air as Sikandar confides in Qalandar. Despite the tension, a sense of shared burden offers a flicker of hope. Meanwhile, a different conversation unfolds. Hassan Gul, his voice betraying a hint of amusement, addresses Munshi:)

"The world's a vast garden, with beauties untold,

Why limit your gaze to a rose half-unrolled?

Perhaps Darshi Forest offers no fertile ground,

A new meadow awaits, where love can be found."

(Hassan Gul's suggestion ; a challenge wrapped in a playful tone. Munshi counters with a response echoing Hassan Gul's lightness:)

"Death may be the villains' final decree,

But threats won't deter my duty, you'll see.

They can take everything, leave me bare and raw,

Yet Darshi Forest is where I'll make my stand, by law."

(The conversation between Hassan Gul and Munshi takes a serious turn. Hassan Gul warns Munshi of the danger he faces and urges him to leave Darshi Forest for his own safety. The next

morning, news about Munshi reaches Hassan Gul that makes him upset . He rushes to Munshi's quarters, finding him flat on his back on the floor of his house; his head wrapped in bandages. Hassan Gul asks him:)

"Munshi, what happened? Tell me, I implore,

Why are you injured, lying on the floor?"

(Munshi:)

"An early riser, I am, by habit's decree,

Prayers at dawn, a ritual for me.

Then, to the logging site, my daily routine,

But memory failed me, a detour unseen.

The pond instead, an error of the mind,

A sudden blow, a club of a cruel kind.

Pain split my head, a blinding surge,

Blood oozed and flowed, a crimson purge.

Four attackers, shadows in the pre-dawn light,

Ambushed and beaten, a pitiful sight.

The Moulvi sahib, a savior in disguise,

Found me unconscious, beneath merciless skies.

Had he not intervened, at this very hour,

You'd be collecting a corpse, not a man with fading power."

(Hassan Gul:)

"The head may heal, a passing, fading plight,

But next time, friend, the darkness might hold greater night.

This village churns, a cauldron on the fire,

No savior guaranteed, no quench for burning pyre.

Look with clear eyes, Munshi, see the storm clouds rise,

Don't let courage blind you, leading to a tragic demise.

Flee this brewing tempest, escape its wrath's embrace,

Before this fight consumes you, leaving naught but an empty space."

(Their conversation overheard, some functionaries of the Firm close to Munshi join them raising their voice in favor of Hassan Gul that given the circumstances the best option left to Munshi was to pack and leave the area. The situation is now getting out of control. The news, however, spread like wildfire. Halima, hearing the story, repairs to the ancient ruins and drops herself at the place she used to sit together with Munshi and gives out her ordeal in a very pathetic tone. The ensuing reverberation in the vale tapers off in fading echoes.)

Fading Echoes

"Heart snips with pain, a scissor's cruel decree,

Darshi's wind whispers of a love to flee.

Heart snips with pain, Munshi, a stranger here,

Bathed in this forest's blood, a growing fear.

Heart snips with pain, by Munshi's side so true,

Loyal Hassan Gul, what will they do?

Heart snips with pain, a stitch with a knife's sting,

Munshi in God's hands, a silent, broken wing.

Heart snips with pain, no blame, just my fate's hold,

Embraced this sorrow, a story yet untold.

Heart snips with pain, bare head beneath the sky,

Tears fall like rain, a welling in my eye."

Sikandar fumed, a storm within,

Qalandar watched, unsure how to win.

Qalandar's rage, a fire bright,

To mend his brother's tarnished light.

The Moulvi Sahib, wise and bold,

A calming hand, a story told.

He brought Hassan Gul to his abode,

With righteous words, a peaceful road.

The Moulvi spoke, a man of grace,

Quoting scriptures, setting the pace.

Hassan listened, then did declare,

‘No trickery here, with villagers I share.

Munshi's no kin, nor partner true,

Just let Halima see things through.

Her lack of interest, clear and plain,

Will bring this turmoil back to sane.'

(Qalandar, present there , says :)

"Have no fear, Hassan, Halima will surely heed our call,

She'll stay within these walls."

(Next day Hassan Gul arrives at Munshi's lodging with a message from Halima.)

"Shah Gandal brings a message, a warning so dire,

Darshi Forest burns with a malevolent fire.

Let the messenger speak, his words clear and bold,

Munshi, your gentle nature is a story untold.

The people you trust, with hearts full of spite,

Will deny you even water, refuse you the light.

A plot they now weave, with malice in mind,

To leave you in some desolate place, forever behind.

Flee, Munshi, flee! Leave Darshi's embrace,

For danger lurks there, a deadly disgrace."

(Munshi listens intently. He stares in disbelief, mumbling:)

"Hassan Gul's words, they leave me in doubt,

His gaze does not match what his lips shout.

But betrayal? No, that's a story untrue,

Hassan seeks no riches, his heart's ever true.

He's loyal and brave, a friend I hold dear,

Such doubts are but whispers, a reason for fear."

Munshi grieved, by Hassan's news distressed,

No comment made, his heart with worry pressed.

His mind in turmoil, seeking truth's embrace,

A change in air, a coming storm's dark trace.

(Munshi is captured again by the turn of events.)

"Halima, pure, would never scheme or lie,"

He muttered low, a tear in his pained eye.

"Intrigues whisper, secrets fill the breeze,

Why drag poor Hassan in this cruel disease?"

Munshi, alone, on his veranda stood,

Hassan had vanished, seeking workers good.

A one-eyed leader, Sakhi, ruled their band,

Known for his toughness, a stern command.

Hassan impressed, the story did impart,

Though from far *Alai*, a cunning, clever heart.

Sakhi, all heard, spoke with wisdom's grace,

"Strangers we are, in this unknown space.

One-eyed I may be, yet all-seeing the Lord,

Many a place on Earth my steps explored.

Zia's strange pursuit, in this remote domain,

Urge him to leave, and peace shall then remain.

No need to stir where troubles lie so deep,

His lingering presence secrets may unsheathe.

Love's burning flame can bring a fiery end,

Why fan the flames, a loyal friend to mend?

Stubbornness reigns, my words fall on deaf ears,

A mere caretaker, calming workers' fears.

He is your friend, your influence employ,

Convince him, Hassan, to depart, and find his joy."

(6)

(The winter is at its peak. Sheets of snow are piled up in every direction. Tree harvesting has been paused. Munshi's men are busy dispatching the timber to Punjab. In another development plots are being hatched in the village how to remove Munshi from the face of earth. There are ten to twelve individuals pondering over the strategy. One amongst them, eyes filled with malice, says:)

"Self-respect, a shield, by comrades valued dear,

To see it crumble, a betrayal held clear.

No counsel heeds this heart, consumed by fear,

Munshi's demise I seek, tonight, bring him here!"

(Second Boy ;voice cold and hard:)

"Shame bows no head to honor's call,

This blight must vanish, lest it consume us all.

Like weeds we'll tear him from the ground,

Munshi's reign of terror, here, unbound!"

(Another villager ,voice booming with conviction:)

"Our strength unites, a righteous claim we hold,

Halima's honor, a village story told!

Munshi's lesson etched for all to see,

Tonight he falls, from this land he'll flee!"

(Suddenly, Ghulaman bursts in, his voice trembling with grief:)

"No time for vengeance, sorrow claims the hour,

Big Aunt has passed, a withered, fallen flower.

No more her voice raised in gentle fight,

Her love a memory, a guiding light.

Let mourning reign, let hearts with grief be filled,

Tonight we honor her, her spirit stilled."

Plots and intrigues in a sudden flight,

The gathered group dissolves into the night.

No cackling whispers, no vengeful scheme,

Just heavy hearts towards a mournful scene.

No kin of blood, yet mourners fill the space,

Around her charpoy, a grief-stricken embrace.

Women's wails ascend, a mournful song,

A heavy cloak of sorrow hangs all along.

In separate halls, the menfolk sit in state,

Heads bowed in grief, a solemn weight.

Every house deserted, a village stands still,

As one they mourn, their hearts with sorrow fill.

Munshi appears, the sun a pale first light,

As Ghulaman's drum beats through the mournful night.

(A somber call echoes for funeral prayers ; the final rite.)

Strong youths uplift the bier, a heavy load,

While Imdad Khan, with generous hand bestowed,

Dry dates for all, a charitable deed,

As sorrow reigns, a village's heart does bleed.

Moulvi Sahib steps forth, a solemn guide,

His cane rests on the ground, a place to confide.

"Hear my words, with reverence attend,

To God's embrace, your hearts and souls transcend!

Youths, cover heads, respect the sacred ground,

For prayers incomplete, forgiveness won't be found.

Shoes aside, for holy ground we tread,

Stand shoulder-to-shoulder, a line well-bred.

Like arrows straight, your bodies must align,

As one we pray, with purpose so divine.

Embrace your prayers, with knowledge take each word,

Why gather sins, when God's grace can be heard?

Repent and learn, let faith your spirit mend,

This final hour, for Big Aunt we ascend."

(Mother addresses Zulaikhan , voice laced with urgency:)

"No early bed! Tonight, a vigil we keep,

By Big Aunt's side, where sorrow runs deep.

Villagers gather, a chorus of grief,

Only God's hand offers lasting relief.

Stay with Halima, share the mournful air,

Then home you come, a daughter's loving care.

Watch over her, my Zulaikhan so dear,

For dangers lurk in the morning unclear.

Accompany your father on his return,

A voice of reason, a lesson we've learned.

Lest he succumb to the chillum's embrace,

And drag us all down in his reckless chase."

Heavy silence reigns, the sisters return,

Each seeks their bed, where solace they yearn.

Quilts wrapped around, a cocoon so tight,

Beneath the stars, the village sleeps in night.

Sikandar secures the gate with a final sound,

Drags out his cot, on the veranda found.

Sikandar, weary from the sleepless night,

Crashes into slumber, a motionless sight.

The lamp's faint glow, a melancholic friend,

Offers Halima no solace to transcend.

A corner of her quilt, Zulaikhan lifts,

Stealing a glance at Halima, adrift.

Head resting on knees, a picture of despair,

Zulaikhan rises, comfort in the air.

Caught by the quilt, she stumbles in her haste,

Yet reaches Halima, concern embraced.

Words of comfort Zulaikhan tries to impart,

But Halima's silence pierces her heart.

(Suddenly a sound breaks the night's silence. Halima sits erect pricking up her ears as if anticipating a familiar note.)

A dog's bark echoes, a voice then appears,

Mumbling pleas through the window, filled with fears.

"Halima, let me sit at your feet," he cries,

Madness consumes me, poison my only prize!"

Ignoring the cold and her father's near rest,

Halima throws caution to the night's unrest.

Water offered, she turns her face away,

As Munshi's pleas pierce through the dawning day.

O'er Zulaikhan, Halima soared in flight,

A vision light, defying moonlit night.

By manor's wall, Munshi's form takes hold,

Two shadows merge, a secret love unfolds.

Full moon's gaze, a silent, watchful eye,

On lovers' form, one shadow in the sky.

Zulaikhan stirred, quilt cast to the floor,

Toward the door she rushed, to witness more.

Moonlight's glare, she shielded searching eyes,

Two figures locked, a truth that can't disguise.

But forms entwined, a different vision spun,

A single light, where darkness should be one.

Darshi's solitude fueled their hearts' delight,

Winter's chill held at bay by love's warm light.

Zulaikhan, caught, a shift in her shy guise,

A brush of the foot, a hint of surprise.

A fleeting thought, a longing to peek more,

But Zulaikhan resisted, closing the door.

A silent prayer, a wish for love's embrace,

She blessed the couple in this sacred space.

The open air, a canvas of delight,

Emotions flared, a dazzling, passionate night.

Cold and darkness lost their chilling might,

Jackals and dogs vanished from their sight.

Distant river's murmur, whispers in the air,

A village gathers, grief a heavy snare.

Snow drapes the world in hushed and somber white,

Halima by Zia, seeking solace in the night.

A plea for words, a yearning to connect,

Munshi stirred, love's embers re-collect.

The magic blooms, dispelling winter's hold,

A heart awakens, a story yet untold.

Though paradise lies in a distant land,

His world revolves in Halima's hand.

"What troubles you?" he asks with gentle grace,

"Love knows no bounds, no mountain to displace.

The moon's too high for earthly ladder's reach,

No hand can move a mountain's mighty breach.

But with you, Zia, to Baramula I'll go,

Hand in hand, love's embers brightly glow.

This fleeting bliss, a night we can't reclaim,

Will future dawns offer love's burning flame?

Promise, Halima, never to depart,

My solace, my strength, my beating heart."

"Torn by doubt," Halima whispers low,

"Can promises mend the cracks that grow?

Myself I hold no dear, a castaway soul,

But village scorn against you takes its toll.

Beware their schemes, their malice in the dark,

Guard yourself well, leave no mark.

This love, a burden on a woman's plight,

But promise me, Munshi, you'll stay out of sight."

A pall of grief, two days it clung,

Big Aunt's loss, joy's silenced tongue.

The villain's coterie, 'neath flickering fire's glow,

Met once more, their wicked plans to sow.

The plot against the lovers, whispered low,

Sharpened now, a deadly, cruel blow.

With every detail, scrutiny took hold,

Oaths by the Quran, their purpose bold.

No voice for patience, vengeance burned so bright,

Sworn under scripture, their resolve took flight.

Though present there, Ghulaman hung his head,

A storm within him, filled with dread.

Deep regret gnawed, a choice he did despise,

For blurting out the truth before their eyes.

He rose and stalked, a silent, furtive stride,

Slipping away, the gathering he defied.

His steps then led him to the Munshi's door,

A warm embrace, a heart that could no more.

"Brother," he pleaded, voice etched with despair,

Hear my words, a truth I swear to share.

The village choked, the air turned foul, it's true,

This mischief's root, it all began with you.

Ghulaman's fault, yes, but a spark it seems,

I lit the fire, scorching all our dreams.

Like dry pine needles, meant to lightly burn,

This conflagration, a cruel lesson learned.

Loose talk, a pleasure, consequences unseen,

Now burdened by wrath, a heavy, bitter scene.

Remorse weighs heavy, a crisis in its wake,

A sieve, a bucket, trust I cannot take.

By Allah, this confession bares the sting,

Not for my sake, but dangers darkness brings.

The villagers, a storm, their fury hot,

Butchers may stalk, a gruesome, bloody lot.

Forget my faults, heed this urgent plea,

For peril lurks tonight, for you and me."

(Enters Hassan Gul, "If you decide to continue your stay, your life won't see tomorrow's dawn." He sounds alarm:)

"Friends, allies combined, a futile stand they make,

Darshi's men approach, a deadly storm to wake.

Expulsion's bitter path, the only way to mend,

For Halima's sake, this ordeal must end."

"Halima's name," Munshi cried, a wounded moan,

"A poisoned dart, it pierces me to the bone.

Her memory on my lips, a constant ache,

Death's cold embrace, a fate I soon partake.

Let others seek refuge, a coward's flight,

These very streets, my world, both dark and bright.

No sunlit days, no shade, could I forsake?

For fear of death, this village I forsake?

Long life's a dream, a fleeting, distant shore,

Hemlock's embrace, a fate I welcome more!"

His anguished cries, a storm within his soul,

Then Zulaikhan's voice, a tale yet to unfold.

Munshi fell silent, a sudden shift of course,

And rushed towards the entrance, with newfound force.

Zulaikhan entered, her voice etched with the strain,

"Snow blankets all, the bitter night's domain.

Rarely do I venture out in such a plight,

But Halima's plea burns ever strong and bright.

Through trials I've come, a message I impart,

A love story fractured, tearing hearts apart.

Darshi Forest churns, a tempest set alight,

News reached your Halima, a harrowing sight.

'Munshi's lifeless form,' the cruel pronouncement came,

'Carried to his rest, to fan the flames of shame.'

Desdemona's plight, a mirror to her core,

Silent and withdrawn, words she spoke no more.

A seizure's grip, a battle fought within,

More than just a message, a token I now bring.

An earring, a symbol, love's enduring plight,

Recognize it, friend, and set the truth to light."

Munshi's eyes squeezed shut, hands outstretched in plea,

A beggar's posture, Zulaikhan's act to see.

He searched her gaze, a wrestler's keen regard,

Then to the earring, his focus turned and hard.

With urgency, Zulaikhan pressed her final plea,

"By God you'll swear, Zia, set our love to be free!

Don't let this blossom wither in the storm,

Flee this village, find solace where you're warm."

(Ghulaman and Hassan Gul also appear on the scene. Ghulaman says:)

“Munshi, the hour grows late, no time to dither,

Baba Faqira's steed awaits, a swift deliverer.

May Allah shield you from all lurking woes,

Let me guide you down, where safety flows.”

(Hassan Gul alerts the employees of the firm :)

"If someone inquires from you about Munshi,

Up at the bungalow they'll surely find he."

(Then Hassan Gul directs attention to Ghulaman:)

"If Munshi reaches the village down below,

Your past mistakes will surely be let go."

Zia, with a sigh, agreed to what they said,

Hassan Gul held him close, while tears he shed.

They were filled with despair, their eyes welled with tears,

The turn of events brought forth their deepest fears.

The story of a vagabond

A wanderer near *Baffa* town did dwell,

No place held him for long, a restless spell.

From *Shinkiari* to Mansehra he'd roam,

Pano Dheri, *Lammay Merey*, his temporary home.

A curious thought within his heart did bloom,

"To Musallah I must go," he'd chant in gloom.

Some scoffed and pleaded, some hugged him tight,

"Musallah's journey, a perilous plight!"

"A madman's dream," some whispered in his ear,

"An orphan, lost, with nothing held so dear.

No kin, no wife, a soul adrift and free,

Like one already dead, for all to see."

The vagabond, unfazed, ignored their dismay,

His heart set on Musallah, come what may.

He battled through the mountains, a determined soul,

From Pakhli's base, he reached Musallah's goal.

He spent the day in respite, but as dusk did fall,

Snowflakes descended, a chilling white squall.

No beast nor man, no shelter to be found,

Musallah's peak, a desolate, lonely ground.

Fear gripped the vagabond, a desperate plight,

He scrambled down, escaping through the white.

A stroke of luck, an English hut he spied,

A cot inside, where weary travelers could confide.

The watchman's haven, used for midday rest,

The vagabond pounded, a forceful guest.

The door gave way, splintered and cracked with a blow,

Smoke and soot swirled, embers glowed in the low.

Cinders remained, a fire's dying breath,

Pine cones nearby, kindling to stave off death.

For warmth he yearned, a fire's life-giving grace,

He stoked the embers, a smile upon his face.

The cot dragged closer, a haven from the night,

The vagabond found solace, bathed in firelight.

An emperor, seeking warmth in such despair,

Would trade his crown for fire's comforting flare.

The vagabond, embraced by heat's gentle hold,

Soon drifted off, a story yet untold.

A fierce wind howled, a whisper in the night,

Feeding the flames, a growing, hungry light.

First cones and kindling, consumed with eager breath,

Then licked the cot, where the vagabond slept beneath.

Fire and wind, a dance of fierce embrace,

Cornering the vagabond, leaving no escape.

The cot engulfed, a final, searing pyre,

The vagabond awoke, consumed by sudden fire.

No path to flee, no hope to find his way,

He stumbled for the door, lost in the cold gray.

Morning's light revealed a scene of devastation,

No trace of hut nor cot, a desolate location.

The vagabond, a charred and twisted form,

Lay frozen on the snow, a victim of the storm.

(7)

The band of thugs, frustrated in their quest,

Munshi nowhere to be found, not even at rest.

Armed with blades, to Musallah they did creep,

Hoping for plunder, but met with a sight too deep.

Loss instead of bounty, a scene of despair,

Where once stood a bungalow, now only ashes were there.

A lone figure sprawled on the snow-covered ground,

A charred and twisted form, no life to be found.

Fear gripped their hearts, an unsettling hush,

No living soul stirred, only a chilling rush.

"Burnt beyond recognition," one muttered in fright,

"How can we tell who perished in this dark night?"

Then one raised a voice, a grim deduction made,

"This is Munshi's body, by fire betrayed!

Another chimed in, agreement in his tone,

"The villain met his end, utterly alone."

A third spoke his mind, a theory unfurled,

"Munshi's nemesis, a vengeance hurled!

These ruffians unwelcome, a curse on the land,

Not a single friend to lend a helping hand."

With a finality harsh, another declared,

“This love's twisted game, forever impaired!”

Satisfied, the villagers closed their lips tight,

Returning to the Munshi's quarters in the fading light.

The tale they relayed to the laborers there,

Who held the key to the truth, a burden to bear.

They saw no need to fan the flames of strife,

“Just a wanderer's demise, not a fight for life.

Ghulaman joined, a secret hand in this,

Together they outsmarted the thugs' vicious fist."

News of the incident spread with the morning light,

Shadows of conifers danced in a smoldering sight.

Hassan Gul perched on his rooftop's edge,

Whittling wood slivers, lost in a mental ledge.

A torrent of thoughts, a storm in his head,

He glanced at the crowd, worry and doubt he fed.

"This simple plan, could it have gone astray?

Did Ghulaman deceive me, lead me astray?

Confusion and fear gnaw at my soul,

Who could unleash such a story untold?

How can I bear the weight of a friend betrayed?

Yet doubt lingers, is Munshi truly dead?"

Ghulaman too, sat in a contemplative mood,

Pondering the identity by the fire imbued.

Hassan Gul beckoned him, a question in tow,

"Where did you find shelter from the wind's forceful blow?

You led Zia to Musallah, so it did seem,

But how will you answer for this wicked scheme?"

Ghulaman, defiant, met his gaze with a spark,

"Hassan Gul, don't let wild thoughts leave their mark!

Never would I deceive you, my word I hold dear,

Don't sully my honor, for that I hold most near.

God is my witness, my actions are true,

Why cast such aspersions, what must I go through?

I left Zia at the bridge, that much is plain,

I answer to God, but harbor no disdain.

How could he reach Musallah, a feat most absurd?

The night's grim events, Hassan Gul, are my word."

Wild rumors swirled throughout the village square,

Some deemed the death impossible, a story too rare.

"A fearless soul gone, consumed by the flame," some sighed,

While others whispered, "A villain, surely fried!"

Some mourned the loss, some found a twisted glee,

The shocking event a chilling mystery.

Love's fragile bloom, a puzzle left unsolved,

But Halima, from the truth, they carefully evolved.

But secrets have a way of finding their light,

The truth reached Halima, a terrible sight.

"Munshi Zia, consumed by fire's cruel rage,

No trace remained on that tragic stage."

Halima, struck dumb by this sudden blow,

Stared into space, a silent, wordless show.

A gasp escaped her, a hand to her breast,

Then crumpled she, put to a cruel test.

Her mother rushed, by her side she did stay,

As Halima shivered on that wintry day.

Sweat beaded her brow, a tremor took hold,

Winter's chill gripped her, a story untold.

Joyful times, once cherished, now a memory's trace,

Halima, lost in a world of vacant space.

Uncaring of food, devoid of social calls,

No whimper, no tear, no mournful waterfalls.

Zulaikhan to Shah Gandal, with worried brow,

"Halima's lips are sealed, a silent vow.

Her parents' pleas fall on deaf ears it seems,

Her vacant eyes reflecting shattered dreams.

Fixated on a point, her gaze won't stray,

Rejecting comfort night and weary day.

Unmoving hours upon her cot she'll spend,

No answer offered, a silent friend.”

Sun, moon, and stars held no allure anymore,

Halima, adrift in a silent, stagnant shore.

One night, on currents of wind, whispers did fly,

A voice from the ruins, a mournful cry.

Fading Echoes

“The scissor blades are snipping off my heart,

A searing pain, a soul torn apart.

Engaged to death, a fate so cruel,

Lost in the night, a sorrow too full.

Suffering's vine climbs, a tangled mess,

Darshi's woods hold ashes, a lover's distress.

Munshi's memory, a haunting refrain,

The forest weeps, echoing my pain.

Halima's thread, unraveled and lost,

Day and night blur, at what terrible cost?

The forest stands silent, no cattle will graze,

Only ghosts remain in this desolate maze.

Flowers bloom bright, a mockery it seems,

Mourning hangs heavy, shattering dreams.

Halima's ghost, a hollow shell,

A cavern of darkness, where sorrows dwell.

Darshi's embrace, a promise betrayed,

Hope and desire forever decayed.

Burn me, not Munshi, set this heart free,

From this endless torment, finally."

(The storyteller explains:)

“The tale unfolds, a memory so grim,

Munshi to Baramula never did return, lost to whim.

Some say in *Athmuqam*, a new life he did forge,

A fakir's attire, a haunted, silent gorge.

With eyes filled with terror, he spoke not a word,

Refusing all comfort, a lonely, unheard bird.

Rajkot, perhaps, offered a different scene,

Yet Munshi, a stranger, forever unseen.

No place held him long, a restless, wandering soul,

By Neelum's banks he wept, his story untold.

Dal Lake or a vagrant's den, whispers did fly,

Dhanial, a haven, a contented family?

The love tale's enigma, unanswered it stays,

Halima's fate lost in the mist of bygone days.”

THE END

Ahmad Hussain Mujahid

Pride of Performance

Saeen Ahmad Ali Award

Baba Jee Gru Nanak Award

Fakhr-e-Mansehra Award

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Muhammad Saleem received his early education from Balakot and Abbottabad. He earned his Master's in English literature from the University of Peshawar . In 1982, he qualified for the Central Superior Services (CSS) and joined the Pakistan Railway Transportation and Commercial Group. He retired as Additional General Manager of Pakistan Railway and now resides in DHA, Islamabad / Rawalpindi.

OTHER BOOKS BY
Muhammad Saleem

- Dew on Rocks (Novel)
- پاکستان ریلوے (ترقی کی شاہراہ یا تختہ مشق)
- مقابلے کا امتحان (خواب سے تعبیر تک)